

THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO  
**THE PROBLEM  
OF EVIL**

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EDITED BY  
Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder



**WILEY** Blackwell



# The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil



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This edition first published 2013  
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*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

The Blackwell companion to the problem of evil / edited by Justin P. McBrayer, Daniel Howard-Snyder.

pages cm

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-470-67184-9 (cloth)

1. Theodicy. 2. Good and evil. I. McBrayer, Justin P., editor of compilation.

BL216.C66 2013

214-dc23

2013016697

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Woodcut by Claire Van Vliet for *The Tragedie of King Lear*, Theodore Press, Bangor, Maine, USA 1986.

Cover design by RBDA.

Set in 10/12.5 pt Minion by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

*This volume is dedicated to our respective mentors in philosophy,  
Peter J. Markie and William P. Alston.*





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# Preface

This volume has a twofold purpose: reference and research. As a work of reference, it is designed to provide accessible, objective, and accurate summaries of contemporary developments concerning the problem of evil. As a work of research, it is designed to advance the dialectic concerning the problem of evil by offering novel insights, criticisms, and responses from top scholars in the field. As such, the volume will serve as a guide to both specialists and nonspecialists alike. Each part of the book opens with an essay that frames the chapters that follow in a rich historical context.

The volume is subdivided into three parts. Part one is entitled “Problems of Evil.” To speak of *the* problem of evil is a mistake – there is no such thing as *the* problem of evil. Instead, there are many different problems, some more pressing than others. Not all problems of evil are best interpreted as arguments from evil for atheism. For example, medieval thinkers were certainly aware of a tension between theism and the existence of evil, though they rarely construe the latter as evidence against the former. God’s existence was beyond doubt; the only question left was how to accommodate an apparent anomaly. This sort of problem of evil has been labeled the “aporetic problem of evil” by Marilyn and Robert Adams in *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). The problem of hell is an aporetic problem of evil of this sort. No one takes the existence of hell to be evidence against the existence of God (since one likely only believes in hell only if one believes in God), but there is still a problem of evil here. The same sort of problem crops up in the problem of apparently morally abhorrent divine commands in Holy Scriptures. The puzzle here is to think more carefully about how we understand evil, omnibeneficence, and divine revelation in order to resolve a philosophical tension.

Other problems of evil are atheological in nature. These sorts of problems of evil suggest that evil provides some sort of evidence against the existence of God. Perhaps the existence of God and evil are logically incompatible. Or perhaps even if they are strictly speaking compatible, the latter provides strong evidence against the former. Or perhaps what really matters is how we might best explain the amount, type, and distribution of evil on earth. Does theism provide a better explanation than naturalism on this score? If not, it looks like the existence of evil is data that supports a naturalistic worldview over a theistic one. Of course, even if it turns out that evil is *some* evidence against theism, it does not follow that theism is unsupported or irrational. Some theistic philosophers grant that evil

provides *prima facie* evidence for atheism, but insist that this *prima facie* evidence is overridden by more powerful evidence for theism. Finally, not all problems of evil are either aporetic or atheological. For example, perhaps there are problems of evil for atheists, too; after all, they must make sense out of a world of good and evil without the assurances and foundation provided by theism.

This evidential focus of problems of evil makes it apparent that just as there is not just one *problem* of evil, there is not just one *evil*, either. In thinking about the problem of evil, one might worry about the general fact that there is evil in the world. Or one might worry about a specific instance of evil, for example, the suffering of a childhood friend. Notice that showing that God's existence is compatible with evil in general will not suffice to show that God's existence is compatible with any given specific instance of evil. Or perhaps the worry is not just that our world has evil in it, but that there are certain *types* of evil in our world (e.g., the suffering of nonhuman animals) or certain *distributions* of evil in it (e.g., the suffering of innocents). Part I of the volume offers clear access points to each of these various ways of thinking about problems of evil.

The remaining two parts of the book provide various responses to problems of evil with a focus on atheological problems of evil. Part II includes responses to problems of evil that go some way towards explaining why our world would have certain evils in it on the assumption that it was created by God. Part III includes responses to evil that admit of no explanation for the evils in our world but insist that the problem of evil is not an evidential problem for theists nonetheless. In other words, Part II includes theodicies, and Part III includes various skeptical replies, including defenses and skeptical theism.

The theodacist must, in Milton's terms, "justify the ways of God to men." A theodicy might argue that the evil in our world is necessary for the instantiation of *anything* good (good/evil dualism), or it might make the more limited claim that the permission of evil in our world is necessary for some particular types of goods, like significant free will, the development of character/virtue, just punishment, and so on. Or perhaps the evil in our world is best explained by appealing to fundamental metaphysical features of reality, including the set of possible worlds that was open to God to actualize. Or perhaps the evil in our world is best explained by a proper understanding of the divine nature itself as suggested by process theologians or some feminist philosophers of religion.

Theodicies are important not just as a possible rejoinder to arguments for atheism, but also as evidence for various species of theism. Almost no one is a "vanilla theist." People who believe in God are typically adherents of major world religions. Religion-specific theodicies might show that certain religions will have an easier time explaining the existence of evil over others. For example, perhaps Hindu theists can invoke karma to explain the existence and distribution of evil better than Judaism. If so, that is a *ceteris paribus* reason for a theist to prefer Hinduism over Judaism. Or perhaps certain views of divine providence have an easier time explaining the existence of evil over others. For example, perhaps open theists can invoke God's ignorance about the future to explain the existence and distribution of evil better than Molinism. If so, that is a *ceteris paribus* reason for a theist to prefer open theism over Molinism. These issues are explored in Part II of this volume.

Skeptical replies to problems of evil in Part III attempt to chart a middle course between the mostly atheological problems of evil sketched in Part I and the theodicies of Part II. Many philosophers grant that we cannot explain why a good God would allow our world to be populated with evil, but they also think that the mere fact that we are unable to

explain the existence of the evil neither poses a threat to rational theistic belief nor supports atheistic belief. Some of these skeptics endorse a response to arguments of evil called *a defense*. A defense is like a theodicy in structure, but instead of being offered as an explanation for what *is* the case, it is offered as what *might* be the case for all we know. The defender suggests that unless we can rule out other live hypotheses for how the evils in our world might be justified, we should not conclude that they are pointless. Another family of views is called skeptical theism. Skeptical theists are theists who are skeptical of our abilities to determine whether the evils in our world are actually pointless. If they are right, then no one is in a position to determine whether certain arguments from evil are sound. Of course, both of these approaches are plagued by a determined set of critics who argue, among other things, that the skeptical responses cannot be consistently maintained by theists who are not moral or global skeptics. These positions and challenges are detailed in Part III of the text.

Justin P. McBrayer  
Daniel Howard-Snyder

# Acknowledgments

In addition to the 33 authors in this volume, the editors would like to thank the many talented philosophers whose hard work in the form of recommendations, feedback, reviews, and criticisms have made the final result that much better. This list includes (but is not limited to!) Charity Anderson, David Anderson, Alex Arnold, Andrew Bailey, Kenny Boyce, Andrew Cullison, John DePoe, Peter Forrest, Kristen Irwin, Beth Johnson, Klaas Kraay, Christian Lee, Matthew Lee, Todd Long, William Mangrum, Jon Matheson, Landon McBrayer, Kevin McCain, Doug Moore, Samuel Newlands, Caleb Ontiveros, Dugald Owen, Sarah Roberts-Cady, Blake Roeber, Jeff Snapper, Brandon Schmidly, Joshua Spencer, Philip Swenson, Thomas Talbott, Neal Tognazinni, Bill Wainwright, Ryan Wasserman, and Steve Wykstra. Thanks to Andrew Law for help with the Index. A special note of thanks goes to our editor, Jeff Dean at Wiley-Blackwell, for his expertise in guiding this project from brainstorm to binding.



Part I

# PROBLEMS OF EVIL



# A Brief History of Problems of Evil

MICHAEL W. HICKSON

## Introduction

If we understand “evil” broadly, as most contemporary philosophers do, to mean “all bad things” – for example, physical and mental suffering, intentional wrongdoing, error, and poverty – then it goes without saying that every Western philosopher and religious thinker has found evil problematic and has attempted, at least partially, to explain its origin and the means of overcoming or escaping it. To give an exhaustive survey of problems of evil in the West, therefore, would amount to writing a fairly complete history of 2500 years of philosophy and religion.

In what follows, therefore, I do not attempt to offer such a complete history, but rather to present several important moments of it in an attempt to track the emergence of what philosophers today call “*the problem of evil*.” In contemporary parlance, “the problem of evil,” despite the definite article, denotes a family of challenges to belief in a God who is supremely benevolent and powerful (van Inwagen 2006, 4–10): how can belief in such a God be justified given the vast extent and often horrendous nature of the suffering and moral depravity of human beings?

This family of problems, depending on logical presentation and authorial intent, can be considered either *aporetically* or *atheologically* (Adams and Adams 1990, 2–3). In the former case, the problems are presented as challenging human reason to think more deeply about the nature of God and his causal relation to the world (see Chapters 9 and 10). In the latter case, the problems are presented such that evil is explicitly offered as strong evidence against the very existence of God (see Chapters 4 and 5). Such atheological arguments, which are the primary focus of contemporary philosophers, have lately been referred to as “arguments from evil” in order to distinguish them from broader problems of evil that do not explicitly threaten belief in God’s existence (Howard-Snyder 1996, xi–xvi). The goal of this chapter is to trace the historical origin of arguments from evil. The question I wish to

answer is this: has the existence of evil always been treated by philosophers as a challenge to God's existence, or is this a more recent trend in thinking about evil?

Since authorial intent is very difficult to determine with any confidence, I focus on the presentation of the problems of evil that have been treated over the centuries, and ask whether the authors in question link evil to the denial of God's existence. The problems of evil that must be considered are those in which evil is used as the basis of an objection to an account of the origin of the universe according to which some God is the principal cause. In considering such problems, I return to the same question: is evil being used to discredit belief in the *existence* of God, or is evil being opposed to some other element of the causal theory?

### Another Footnote to Plato

Western philosophical reflection on the problem of evil is, not surprisingly, another footnote to Plato (429–347 BC). But a footnote to which dialogue or dialogues? A single passage in the *Republic* has been identified as “the first distinct statement in Greek literature of the problem of evil” (Chase Greene 1944, 298): “since a god is good, he is not – as most people claim – the cause of everything that happens to human beings but of only a few things, for good things are fewer than bad ones in our lives. He alone is responsible for the good things, but we must find some other cause for the bad ones, not a god” (Plato [1018] 1997; 379c).

The problem of evil is certainly lurking in the background of this passage, where the concern is to avoid charging the gods with any involvement in evil. However, this text does not yet explicitly state or engage any problem of evil; rather, the text sets up an elegant evasion of all such problems, an evasion that will be elaborated in the sequel to the *Republic*, the dramatic cosmological story of the *Timaeus*. In both dialogues, Plato advances a dualistic account of the origin of the universe. There is not a single, supremely powerful, and perfectly good original cause that is responsible for all that exists, and that must therefore be justified in the face of so much evil in the world; instead, Plato conveniently places all the blame for evil on a second eternal cause, which can be “persuaded” by the power of the good cause only to a limited extent.

In the *Timaeus*, the two original causes of the universe are named “Mind” and “Necessity.” Mind acts on Necessity (by which Plato means the eternal disorderly motion of an unformed mass) “persuading it to direct most of the things that come to be toward what is best” (Plato [1250] 1997; 48a). The Demiurge, the anthropomorphic representation of Mind in the dialogue, first created because “He was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible” (Plato [1236] 1997; 29e). In so far as the universe was created by the Demiurge, therefore, it is “as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow” (Plato [1236] 1997; 30b). But the Demiurge, though powerful, is not omnipotent, so disease<sup>1</sup> and vice, both of which arise from the eternal and corruptive disorderly motion of matter, still exist. Even moral evil is blamed in Plato's *Timaeus* on Necessity: “[J]ust

1 For a discussion of the causes of physical evil, see Plato ([1266]1997 (64c–d)).

about every type of succumbing to pleasure is talked about as something reproachable, as though the evils are willfully done. But it is not right to reproach people for them, for no one is willfully evil. A man becomes evil, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of his body and an uneducated upbringing" (Plato [1286] 1997; 86d–e).

Evil is not presented in the *Timaeus* as a possible threat to belief in the Demiurge. Nor is the Demiurge's goodness or activity in the world ever doubted on the basis of evil: "the existence of evil is not of the Demiurge's choosing; it exists in spite of the best demiurgic actions" (Mohr 1978, 575). Plato's *Timaeus* is certainly not, therefore, the first text to raise an argument from evil.

There are at least two separate statements of problems of evil, however, in the later *Laws*, in the theological 10th book of that dialogue. The origin and extent of evil becomes undeniably problematic for Plato in this work because his earlier dualism is largely set aside in this new account of the governance of the universe, summarized in this passage: "A soul or souls – and perfectly virtuous souls at that – have been shown to be the cause of all [celestial] phenomena, and whether it is by their living presence in matter that they direct all the heavens, or by some other means, we shall insist that these souls are gods" (Plato [1556] 1997; 899b). Whereas in the *Timaeus*, disorderly matter was coeternal with and independent of the benevolent Demiurge, in *Laws X* "soul is prior to matter, and . . . matter came later and takes second place. Soul is the master, and matter its natural subject" (Plato [1553] 1997; 896c).

The dualistic dissolution of the problem of evil still tempts Plato in *Laws X*, however, where an evil World Soul is posited in addition to the good World Soul: "[Is there] one soul, or more than one? I'll answer for you both: more than one. At any rate, we must not assume fewer than two: that which does good, and that which has the opposite capacity" (Plato [1553] 1997; 896e). This dualism is not exploited by Plato, however, for he believes the whole rational order of the universe points to the predominant activity of the good World Souls, who are described as "supremely good" gods who "know and see and hear everything"; who "can do anything which is within the power of mortals and immortals"; who are "supremely wise, and willing and able to superintend the world"; and who, like a good physician, look after the whole body, but also after every minor detail of it in order to keep it healthy (Plato [1558–1560] 1997; 901d–903a). Goodness is effectively unlimited and omnipotent in *Laws X*.

Given the supremacy of the virtuous gods in *Laws X*, it is unsurprising that Plato was forced to raise explicit problems of evil against this causal theory. The first he puts into the mouths of people who believe that the gods exist, but who claim that they take no notice of human affairs. In other words, the presence of evil is used as a reason to deny divine Providence. The particular evils that drive people to such "impiety" are "the good fortune of scoundrels and criminals in private and public life" and "the many ghastly acts of impiety which . . . are the very means by which some of these people have risen from humble beginnings to supreme power and dictatorship" (Plato [1556–1557] 1997; 899d–900a). When the problem of evil first explicitly enters Western thought, therefore, it has anti-Providential, not fully atheistic, force.

The second problem of evil in the *Laws* likewise challenges divine Providence, but of a more particular sort. Evils such as those just mentioned are indeed reproachable, Plato says, but "the universe has [been] arranged with an eye to its preservation and excellence, and its individual parts play appropriate active or passive roles according to their various capacities." To an imagined "impious" interlocutor, the Athenian sharply asserts: "You

forget that creation is not for your benefit: *you* exist for the sake of the universe.” Yet the Athenian understands the basis of his interlocutor’s worry: “you’re grumbling because you don’t appreciate that your position is best not only for the universe but for you too” (Plato [1560] 1997; 903b–d). It is not Providence in general that strikes the alleged impious man as improbable, but rather beneficent Providence *toward himself*.

Following but slightly adapting Peter van Inwagen’s terminology, the first problem of evil in *Laws* X might be called “Plato’s Global Problem of Evil,” while the second might be called “Plato’s Local Problem of Evil.” The global problem challenges divine Providence in general on the basis of the broad presence of evil in human affairs, while the local variation challenges divine Providence toward certain individuals on the basis of their more-difficult-than-average lot in life (van Inwagen 2006, 56). Plato, like van Inwagen, found the two problems of evil sufficiently different to warrant separate attention; but unlike van Inwagen, Plato did not explicitly link either problem to the question of God’s existence.

### “Epicurus’ Old Questions” and Ancient Skepticism

In his treatment of the problem of evil in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume (1711–1776) repeats what he calls “Epicurus’ old questions” about God: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?” (Hume 1993, 100). This is indeed an elegant and succinct, and therefore eminently quotable, statement of the problem of evil, and so it is unsurprising that since Hume’s time it has been customary to begin articles and books on evil with this passage. This puzzle of Epicurus (341–270 BC) is often taken to be one of the first statements of an argument from evil (see, e.g., Plantinga 2004, 3).

A minor problem with this bit of popular history is that there is no extant Epicurean work containing this text. Hume’s source for the now-famous passage was probably the *Dictionary* article “Paulicians,” remark E, of Pierre Bayle (see Bayle 1991, 169), whose source in turn was chapter 13 of *On Anger* by the ancient (240–320) church Father, Lactantius (see Lactantius 1871, 28). Epicurus was among the most prolific ancient authors (Diogenes Laertius credits him with over 300 books), however, and we possess very few fragments of his works, so he may well have uttered the old questions in a work that is now lost, perhaps in *Of the Gods*, which is referred to by Diogenes Laertius as one of Epicurus’ best books (Diogenes 2005, 557).

A more serious problem with this popular history is the supposition, assuming Epicurus framed his problem of evil in the words Lactantius reports, that there could have been atheistic intent behind his questions. For one thing, it is questionable whether anyone could have been an atheist in the Hellenistic period, so pervasive was religion in daily life. The word “atheist,” though common in Epicurus’ time, was a term of abuse more than an attempt to describe anyone’s beliefs.<sup>2</sup> But more importantly, all the evidence available to us suggests that Epicurus believed in God, though he undoubtedly denied divine provi-

2 For a discussion and bibliography concerning ancient atheism in general, and Epicurus’ alleged atheism in particular, see Bremmer (2007, 11–26).

dence: if the “old questions” belong to him, therefore, their publication had, like Plato’s even older questions, antiprovidential, not atheistic intent.

Epicurus’ belief in the gods is seen early in his extant *Letter to Menoeceus*, a summary of Epicurean ethics, where this advice is offered before anything else: “First, believe that god is an indestructible and blessed animal, in accordance with the general conception of god commonly held, and do not ascribe to god anything foreign to his indestructibility or repugnant to his blessedness” (Inwood and Gerson 1997, 28). But what ascriptions are “foreign” and “repugnant” to the gods’ nature? The faithful disciple of Epicurus, Lucretius (99–55 BC), answers in his poem *On the Nature of the Universe* that both creation and providence are incompatible with the blessedness of the gods: “For what benefit could immortal and blessed beings reap from our gratitude, that they should undertake any task on our behalf? Or what could tempt those who had been at peace so long to change their old life [before creation] for a new?” (Lucretius 1994, 133).

Perhaps Epicurus was the author of the “old questions” made famous by Hume, but perhaps he was not – not enough evidence exists to decide the question. There is evidence, however, that the questions were posed by early Skeptics, and/or perhaps Gnostics (Larimore 2001, xviii–xxii). While the trilemma attributed to Epicurus is found in none of his extant works, or in those of his earliest followers, an expanded version of the old questions is found in the third book of the *Outlines of Scepticism* by Sextus Empiricus (circa 160–210):

[I]f [the gods] provided for all things, there would be nothing bad and evil in the universe; but [people] say that everything is full of evil. Therefore the gods will not be said to provide for everything. But if they provide for some things, why do they provide for these and not for those? Either they both want to and can provide for all, or they want to but cannot, or they can but do not want to, or they neither want to nor can. If they both wanted to and could, then they would provide for all; but they do not provide for all, for the reason I have just given; therefore it is not the case that they both want to and can provide for all. If they want to but cannot, they are weaker than the cause in virtue of which they cannot provide for the things for which they do not provide; but it is contrary to the concept of god that a god should be weaker than anything. If they can provide for all but do not want to, they will be thought to be malign. If they neither want to nor can, they are both malign and weak – and only the impious would say this about the gods.

The gods, therefore, do not provide for the things in the universe. But if they have providence for nothing and have no function and no effect, we will not be able to say how it is apprehended that there are gods, since it is neither apparent in itself nor apprehended by way of any effects. For this reason too, then, it is inapprehensible whether there are gods. (Sextus 2000, 145–146)

The first paragraph of the passage just quoted once again relates the problem of evil to doubt about divine providence. The broader conclusion drawn in the second paragraph is a development in the use of the problem of evil: the existence of the gods is inapprehensible by us once general divine providence is denied. This latter agnostic conclusion is almost certainly not of Epicurean origin. As we have seen, Epicurus himself counseled belief in the gods. Moreover, the context of the earlier passage is an argument *against* the Epicureans, who are counted among the theological “Dogmatists.”

Is Sextus Empiricus the first to offer an argument from evil?<sup>3</sup> If arguments from evil are ultimately meant to disprove the existence of a good and powerful God, then the answer is “no.” As a Pyrrhonian skeptic, Sextus does not argue for or against the existence of gods, but recommends suspension of judgment on the question. The argument just quoted at length is an objection to dogmatism about the gods and in favor of skepticism about theological claims in general. As such, it is more appropriately called an “agnostic problem of evil,” rather than an atheistic argument from evil.

## Augustine and the Manichean Problem of Evil

Metaphysical dualism – the claim that there are two irreducible causes of the universe – is an effective means of avoiding the problem of evil, as we have already seen in the case of Plato’s *Timaeus* (see Chapter 13). Rejecting dualism in favor of a single ultimate cause invites the problem of evil. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the most formidable opponents of early Christian theologians were dualistic gnostics, who knew that they themselves were immune to the problem of evil, and that their adversaries, monotheistic Christians, were not. The most celebrated of such debates were recorded by St. Augustine of Hippo, who converted from Manicheism to Christianity. Augustine’s writings against the Manicheans comprise a massive compilation of problems of evil, all of which share in common that they seek to discredit the view that a single benevolent God created the universe *ex nihilo* without being compelled by some external and independent cause. It is the unity of the ultimate causal principle that is the target of these objections, not the existence of God; so once again, we are not dealing with arguments from evil.

Augustine summarizes the Manichean view he once held as follows. First, “God is incorruptible, absolutely inviolable, and unable to be defiled”: that is, a perfectly good and powerful God does indeed exist. However, in addition to God, there has also eternally existed a “nation of darkness,” which is sometimes referred to as an evil substance opposed to the substance of God. This nation of darkness rebelled, and “when almighty God saw the great ruin and devastation that threatened his kingdoms unless he set something in the way of the enemy nation and resisted it, he sent forth [h]is power, and this world was fashioned from this power’s mingling with evil” (Augustine 1990, 145).

According to the Manicheans, the human soul is consubstantial with God and suffers evil (pain and sin) only because of its mingling with evil through the body. Human wickedness is not the result of any activity proper to the human soul, certainly not of any freedom of the will. Just as God was forced by the rebellion of darkness to send human souls into the fray, so too human souls are bound by necessity whenever their acts have the slightest evil character, as Fortunatus, a Manichean, explains: “We say that the soul is forced to sin by the opposing nature” (Augustine 1990, 156). The Manicheans thus avoid the problem of evil because, on their view, physical and moral evil exist because God was necessitated by the rebellion of an enemy substance to send human souls into the nation of darkness in order to place a limit on it and win victory for God. There are innumerable

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3 Perhaps not, for there is speculation that “Epicurus’ old questions” were pulled by Lactantius from a lost portion of an earlier skeptical work, Cicero’s (106–43 BC) *On the Nature of the Gods*. See Lactantius (1965, 93, note 8). See also Cicero (1998, 133 and 207).



metaphysical problems with this view, which Augustine ably exploits, but as for the origin of evil, the Manicheans were on the offensive against the Bishop of Hippo.

The main argument of the Manichean Fortunatus against Augustine, the fundamental “Manichean Problem of Evil,” is that it is inconsistent to believe both, on the one hand, that all things exist as the result of a single God’s command, and on the other, that the soul does not derive from God its proclivity toward sins, vices, and worldly things (Augustine 1990, 148–149). Either everything is from God, including the human subjection and propensity to evil, or not everything is from God, and there is a second substance opposed to the divine one. Augustine’s well-known response is that God gave human beings free will, which was misused by the first man and woman, leading to punishment by God in the form of physical evil.

For their rebuttal, the Manicheans advanced two additional problems of evil: call them the “Problem of Divine Complicity” and the related “Problem of Foreknowledge.” Fortunatus puts the former problem as follows: “since you say that God gave free choice, he would already be found to consent to my sin, because he would be the author of my sin . . .” (Augustine 1990, 154). Since free choice is a power that ultimately derives from God’s own power, the very power involved in individual human sin stems from God, who is therefore ultimately the author of sin. Even if the power of the soul to sin could be metaphysically distinguished from God’s authorship, there is the problem of God’s foreknowledge. This divine attribute leads to a more general problem of evil, which Fortunatus pointedly states: “You assert that we say that God is cruel in sending the soul [into the nation of darkness], but you claim that God made man and breathed a soul into him, which he certainly foreknew would be involved in future misery and could not be restored to its inheritance by reason of its evils. This is an act either of someone ignorant or of someone who hands the soul over to these evils . . .” (Augustine 1990, 160–161).

Augustine’s reflection on these problems formed the basis for many of the subsequent medieval discussions of evil. As we will see, however, Augustine’s writings against the Manicheans were unsuccessful in burying once and for all the dualistic threat to Christian accounts of the origin of evil.

## The Argument from Evil in Aquinas’s *Summa*

In Augustine’s time, evil was not widely acknowledged as a threat to belief in the existence of God. Evil had been invoked in argument against the unity of the creator, divine providence, and the human capacity to know whether any gods existed; but evil had not yet served in an explicit attack on the very existence of God. There is no ancient argument from evil.

The first clear statement of an argument from evil (to my knowledge) occurs in the *Summa Theologica* (ST) of Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) as one of only two objections raised against the existence of God: “It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word ‘God’ means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist” (Aquinas 1947, 13; ST I, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 1).

The argument from evil therefore dates back to roughly 1266 (the year when Aquinas began writing the *Summa*). But did Aquinas consider his argument from evil a *real threat*

to belief in the existence of God? Here is the opinion of a recent commentator on Aquinas, who has tried to place Aquinas's thought on God and evil in relation to contemporary discussions of the problem of evil:

In a serious sense, however, Aquinas has *nothing* to say on this topic [the argument from evil]. I mean that he never offers a stand-alone discussion of what contemporary philosophers have come to call the problem of evil. He has no book or essay on it. He offers no full-length treatment starting along the lines "God is X, Y, Z, etc.; yet evil exists; so how can we reconcile evil with God's existence?" In this sense, what now passes as the problem of evil goes unmentioned in Aquinas' writings. These engage in no sustained theodicy or defense of belief in God written with an eye on evil. (Davies 2011, 6)

Davies is right, it seems to me, that despite Aquinas' statement of an argument from evil in the *Summa*, he did not believe that evil posed a serious threat to belief in God. So it is not entirely accurate to date the argument from evil back to Aquinas. Davies' book is the fullest treatment on this topic, but a few points can be added in defense of his thesis. First, in the massive treatise *On Evil*, Aquinas never explicitly mentions evil as a threat to belief in God's existence. Aquinas says much in that treatise that sets up modern discussions of the argument from evil, but he himself never raises the issue of God's existence in this book *devoted exclusively to issues relating to evil* (see Aquinas 1995, xv). Second, Aquinas does explicitly discuss impediments to reason's discovery of the existence of God, but when he does so, the seeming incompatibility of God and evil is not mentioned. The main obstacles in reasoning toward God are lack of philosophical ability, the demands of practical life, laziness, the length of time needed to arrive at that conclusion, and the susceptibility of human minds to error (see Wippel 2000, 382–383). Third, the argument from evil that Aquinas does raise in the *Summa* is, by his own standards, extremely weak. That argument assumes that evil is contrary to goodness, but the second misconception about evil that Aquinas clears away in the opening pages of *On Evil* is that evil is not opposed to goodness as a contrary, but in the way that a privation is opposed to the possession of a quality. To call evil the contrary of goodness must have seemed to Aquinas a metaphysical blunder hardly worthy of the two short sentences that he devotes to resolving the argument from evil in the *Summa*.

So why did Aquinas raise the argument from evil if he did not think it had any merit? There are reasons internal to Aquinas' philosophy and external to it. The internal reason is that the argument from evil gives support to Aquinas's claim earlier in the *Summa* – a claim that many in his day would have been surprised to read – that the proposition "God does not exist" is thinkable by people other than the "fools" of which Scripture speaks. In other words, it bolsters Aquinas' thesis that the existence of God is not self-evident by showing that reasons can be offered against theism. These arguments may be weak, but they are not irrational.

The reason external to Aquinas's philosophy that explains why he invented an argument from evil is the literary form in which the *Summa* was written, namely the Aristotelian-Scholastic form of disputation, which had this formula: question, objections to thesis, thesis, appeal to authority, arguments on behalf of thesis, and replies to objections. Aquinas wanted to demonstrate God's existence, but the Scholastic method demanded that he first begin with an objection or two. The requirement may seem arbitrary, but it was grounded in the advice of The Philosopher himself, Aristotle, who advises in the *Topics*: "In dealing

with any thesis, be on the look-out for a line of argument both pro and con. . . . If we cannot find anyone else to argue with, we should argue with ourselves" (Aristotle 1984, 276; 163a36–163b3).

That Aquinas presented an argument from evil in the *Summa* is not necessarily evidence that evil was at that time considered a plausible threat to belief in God's existence. It is rather an example of Aquinas needing to "argue with himself" in order to fulfill the strict demands of Aristotle's philosophical methodology. Is it possible that in this way Aquinas, or some earlier Scholastic philosopher, unwittingly introduced into the West the argument that is today taken to be the strongest support for atheism? Such a historical thesis is plausible, and would amount to a particular instance of Alan Charles Kors's broader thesis that atheism was introduced to the West largely and inadvertently through the writings of defenders of religious belief (see Kors 1990, 81–110).

## Calvin, Descartes, and the Early-Modern Obsession with Evil

Problems of evil were not felt to be as urgent in later medieval philosophy as they were in Augustine's time, when the threat of Manicheism was looming large (Kent 2007, 178). To be sure, evil was a central philosophical topic for over a thousand years after Augustine. But evil was not primarily an objection to anything; it was instead a subject, like virtue, to be explicated and placed within a wider moral and metaphysical framework.

Objections based on evil became an important polemical device again, however, during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Core Christian beliefs were under attack for their apparent incompatibility with the evil in the world, but this attack was not from outside the fold, as it was in Augustine's time. Instead, Christians raised problems of evil against other Christians in an attempt to undermine their opposing sect's theology.

No theologian was spared such objections, but Calvinists were most often on the defensive because of their doctrine of predestination. This doctrine of "double predestination" is summarized by John Calvin (1509–1564) in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

[I]n accordance with what scripture clearly shows, we say that the Lord once established in His eternal and immutable counsel whom He would take to salvation and whom He would leave in destruction. We say that He receives those whom He calls to salvation by His free mercy, without any regard for their own worth; on the contrary, that the entrance into life is closed to all those whom He wishes to give over to damnation and that this is done by His secret and incomprehensible but righteous and fair judgment. (Calvin 2009, 417)

Calvin's doctrine of predestination was controversial because he taught that God predestined *both* that certain people would be saved *and* that certain people would be damned. Divine election to salvation was a common doctrine, but the addition of divine reprobation from all eternity was found scandalous. Calvin might have assuaged his readers' anxiety by teaching that God predestined certain people to damnation because He had foreseen that they would sin; but this was just the opposite of what Calvin taught. In the *Institutes*, he teaches that God foresaw that people would sin precisely because He had foreordained all events. In other words, the predestination of the damned is the reason why God knows the damned will sin (see Klooster 1977, 60–79).

Calvin was well aware of the grumbling his view would cause, and so he anticipated his opponents' principal objection, which we can call the problem of double predestination:

"First they ask why God is angry with His creatures who did not provoke Him by any offense, for to destroy whomever He pleases is something more fitting to the cruelty of a tyrant than to the uprightness of a judge. Thus it seems to them that people have good reason to complain about God if by His pure will, without their own deserving, they are predestined to eternal death" (Calvin 2009, 423).

A century of obsession over problems of evil commenced in the early 1600s when Jacobus Arminius, previously an orthodox Calvinist, published his famous "Remonstrance" of five points against the theology of Calvin (for Arminius' motivation, see Bangs 1971, 138ff.). The main problem Arminius and his followers (the "Arminians" or "Remonstrants") found with Calvin's theology was that its "insistence . . . upon God's omnipotence and man's helplessness . . . led immediately and necessarily to the conclusion that God Himself was responsible for man's sins and was the cause of his damnation" (Rex 1965, 80). Calvin's God, in other words, was a cruel tyrant. The Arminian controversy led the Dutch Calvinist church to hold a Synod at Dordrecht in 1618, at which the orthodox Calvinist teaching, and *not* the Arminian teaching, on predestination was upheld. This validation of "Counter-Remonstrant" Calvinism was a political revolution of great importance (Israel 1995, 465), and more importantly for our purposes, put the origin of evil at the center of theological debates for the next hundred years.

Several decades after the Synod of Dordrecht, problems of evil would likewise take front-and-center in philosophical debates, thanks in large part to the publication of René Descartes' (1596–1650) *Meditations*. The *Meditations* seeks to attain unshakeable certainty at the foundations of knowledge. The linchpin of the Cartesian system is the existence of a benevolent God: since God is perfect, He can be no deceiver, and so whatever He has endowed human beings with, particularly intellect and will, must be good and reliable. There is consequently hope – *pace* early modern skeptics like Montaigne – that humans can attain sure knowledge. But the fourth Meditation raises an objection against Descartes' claims about God's benevolence and the goodness of His creatures' intellects. It is naturally the problem of error: if God's gift of intellect to human beings is good, then how does it happen at all, let alone so frequently, that humans go astray in using the intellect? Whence error? Why are humans not omniscient, or at least unerring?

Descartes' solutions to these worries (to be treated later in this volume) hardly put an end to these questions. Not surprisingly, then, philosophers who wrote immediately after Descartes, such as Arnauld, Spinoza, Bayle, Malebranche, and Leibniz, all wrote extensively on the fourth Meditation topics of the nature and sources of error, and broader problems of evil raised earlier that Protestant–Catholic polemics had again brought to the fore.

## Bayle and the Insolubility of the Problem of Evil

First published in 1697, the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* of Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) would become the philosophical bestseller of the eighteenth century, exceeding the sales of works by Newton, Locke, Voltaire, and Rousseau, and it has since been recognized as "the arsenal of the Enlightenment" (Lennon 1999, 7). Hume knew it well, and recommended a close reading of certain sections before approaching his own work (Hume 2007, 203–204).

The *Dictionary* is difficult to navigate. Articles are devoted to authors or sects, and are arranged alphabetically, while over three-quarters of the millions of words of the *Dictionary*

are contained in dual-columned footnotes treating various philosophical topics only loosely related to the subjects of the main articles. However, even random forages through the volumes quickly reveal that the problem of evil is a dominant theme of the *Dictionary*, which contains enough relevant material spread throughout to be considered the first, and even today the most complete, history of problems of evil to 1700.<sup>4</sup>

Since both Calvinism and Cartesianism marked his early education, it is unsurprising that the controversies and problems treated earlier fascinated Bayle. As he saw it, both the theological and philosophical debates over evil had reached a stalemate. First, the theological debates: "Since Luther and Calvin appeared on the scene, I do not believe a year has gone by without someone accusing them of making God the author of sin. . . . [Pierre Jurieu] admits the accusation is just against Luther. The Lutherans nowadays make the same claim about Calvin. The Roman Catholics make the claim about both of them. The Jesuits say it is the case with Jansenius" (Bayle 1991, 183).<sup>5</sup> The philosophical stalemate was witnessed by Bayle between 1684 and 1686, as he reported in his academic journal, *News from the Republic of Letters*, the debate between the two most famous philosophers of his day, Antoine Arnauld and Nicolas Malebranche, over the nature of divine providence, natural evils, and human error.<sup>6</sup> The two philosophers each built brilliant systems for dealing with problems of evil, but each also successfully undermined the other's work in Bayle's view.

After decades of studying the history of problems of evil, Bayle declared his own position: complete skepticism (see Chapter 29). "[T]he way in which evil was introduced under the government of a supreme, infinitely good, infinitely holy, and infinitely powerful being is not only inexplicable, but also incomprehensible. And all that can be opposed to the reasons why this being has allowed evil agrees more with the natural light and the ideas of order than do the reasons themselves" (Bayle 1991, 168–169). Bayle proved this thesis in the *Dictionary*'s most notorious articles, "Manicheans" and "Paulicians." His strategy is to show that if Manicheism existed in the seventeenth century, a proponent of it could easily overwhelm Christians in debates over the origin of evil. In other words, Bayle resurrected the ancient Manichean problems of evil in order to uphold his skepticism.

Bayle's goal was not thereby to undermine monotheism or support Manicheism; it was instead to demonstrate that reason was at odds with itself. *A priori* reason, in Bayle's view, reveals nothing more clearly than the existence of a perfect, and therefore benevolent, God. From this perspective, then, there is no problem of evil: everything created by God must be good, not only in general, but also for every individual. *A posteriori* reason conflicts with *a priori* reason, because on the basis of the evidence of human experience, the hypothesis of two gods, one good and one evil, is far more probable than the hypothesis of a single, infinitely good, God. Columns and columns of footnotes to "Manicheans" and "Paulicians" show how dualist Manicheans would outdo monotheistic Christians in accounting for the experiences of pain and moral wickedness (see Bayle 1991, 144–154, 166–194). What is left can be called Bayle's skeptical problem of evil. It is a second-order problem (a problem

4 To begin, see "Arminius," "Gomarus," "Epicurus," "Helen," "Manicheans,"\* "Marcionites," "Origen," "Paulicians,"\* "Pericles," "Pyrrho,"\* "Synergists," "Zoroaster," and the "Clarification on the Manicheans."\* Unfortunately, only articles marked with "\*" are in the Popkin translation. We need a new English translation of the entire *Dictionary*, but for the time being, see Bayle (1984) for the other articles.

5 Bayle, *Dictionary*, "Paulicians," remark F. Pierre Jurieu was a Calvinist theologian and polemicist.

6 The occasion of the dispute was Malebranche's 1680 *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. See Malebranche (1992).

about problems), and states that the various problems of evil treated earlier cannot be solved by human reason.

The question of Bayle's intentions in these articles has been much debated. Bayle's contemporaries, Jean Le Clerc and Isaac Jaquelot, feared that Bayle had launched an assault against basic Christian beliefs. Most famously, G.W. Leibniz, especially in response to Bayle's *Dictionary* and *Dialogues of Maximus and Themistius* (1707), wrote the *Theodicy* (1710) in an attempt to solve, or at least insert optimism again into, the debates over the origin of evil. Recent commentators have been less confident that Bayle intended to undermine religion,<sup>7</sup> but they have not then agreed about his true intentions: "To take just the twentieth-century literature, the suggestions are that Bayle was fundamentally a positivist, an atheist, a deist, a sceptic, a fideist, a Socinian, a liberal Calvinist, a conservative Calvinist, a libertine, a Judaizing Christian, a Judaeo-Christian, or even a secret Jew, a Manichean, an existentialist . . ." (Lennon 1999, 15).

Yet Bayle could not have expressed his intentions more clearly: "All of this warns us that we should not dispute with the Manicheans until we have established the doctrine of *the elevation of faith and the abasement of reason*" (Bayle 1991, 176–177). The problem of evil is insoluble in Bayle's stated opinion, and this insolubility is a reminder to humans of the weakness of reason, and the need for faith. We can all at least agree that there is, again, no explicit argument from evil here, since Bayle's arguments everywhere concede that God exists, though perhaps in the company of an opposing, malevolent deity.

## The First Logical and Evidential Arguments from Evil

With the *Dictionary* articles concerning evil close at hand, two eighteenth-century philosophers set about removing all ambiguity from Bayle's arguments, and demonstrating that the existence of God is cast into serious doubt by the evil in the world. The first writer, the anonymous author of the French work (despite the Latin title), *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus* (written between 1760 and 1770), sought to demonstrate the logical incompatibility of the existence of a good God and the existence of physical and moral evil. This author is to my knowledge the first to sincerely advance a logical argument from evil of the sort that J.L. Mackie (1955) most famously defended in 1955. The second author, David Hume (1711–1776), in the 10th and 11th chapters of his posthumous *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, offers the humbler argument that the existence of a morally good first cause of the universe is highly improbable given the evidence of our senses. Various rival hypotheses incompatible with traditional theism, such as the existence of a morally neutral first cause, are far more likely. Hume is to my knowledge the first to offer an evidential argument from evil of the sort Paul Draper and others have more recently offered (see Draper 1989, 331–350).

The *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus* (JBR) begins by expounding the Epicurean theses, recast by Giordano Bruno (once a Dominican friar, and eventually burned for heresy in 1600), of the infinite vastness of the universe and the plurality of worlds. Epicurean antiprovidentialism early in the work turns to outright atheism beginning in the third chapter, "On the Existence of God," which offers a natural history of belief in God, and finally a philosophical attack on that belief.

7 My own interpretation is that Bayle was arguing for religious toleration by undermining traditional theodicies. See Hickson (2010; 2013).



The fifth and final chapter is devoted to proving that because evil exists, God does not. It begins: "There is evil in the world, and yet there is a God: is this believable? No. One must consent to the annihilation of one of these two things in order to conserve the existence of the other" (*JBR*, 96–97).<sup>8</sup> The argument is basically the Thomistic one considered earlier. The majority of the fifth chapter considers the most important responses to this argument, particularly the free will theodicy. The anonymous atheist finds none of these convincing, attempts to refute them all, and concludes with his main case against God: "An infinitely good being who is all-powerful must neither commit nor permit anything but what is good. Now if there were infinite goodness in the world, there would be no evil, not even the shadow of evil. Yet there is evil: I leave you to derive the logical conclusion" (*JBR*, 110). The conclusion is obvious in the context of the *JBR*'s brazen atheism: there is no God.

The intent behind Hume's *Dialogues* is more difficult to discern. What is incontestable, however, is that an argument from evil that aims to render the existence of a good God improbable culminates in that work's 11th chapter. It seems very likely, though it cannot easily be proven, that Hume, through his carefully crafted and balanced dialogue, wished to render God's existence improbable. That Philo, his skeptical interlocutor, offers an argument to this effect is, however, beyond all doubt.

Hume has Philo repeatedly assert that God and evil are consistent, so the argument from evil that is eventually offered is not of the logical, but rather of the evidential variety: "however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistence is not absolutely denied, only the inference" (Hume 1993, 107). Philo's strategy in reflecting at length on evil is to show that a hypothesis that is inconsistent with that of a good God, namely the hypothesis of a nonmoral first cause, is more probable than the hypothesis of a good God. Philo's argument involves enumerating four principal causes on which all the natural evil in the world depends, and showing that none of these is necessary. A better world than this is possible, and so it seems from the standpoint of reason that a good and powerful God ought to have created that other better world. Philo concludes:

There may *four* hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe: *that* they are endowed with perfect goodness, *that* they have perfect malice, *that* they are opposite and have both goodness and malice, *that* they have neither goodness nor malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles. And the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable. (Hume 1993, 114)

Like Bayle, Hume believes that the mix of good and evil in the world, not just the presence of evil, is the real problem for theists. "Mixed phenomena," thinks Hume, render belief in a single good God, or a single evil God, improbable. Unlike Bayle, Hume finds Manichean dualism improbable on the basis of the apparent order in the universe. Strong probability, therefore, rests with the hypothesis of a nonmoral first cause of the universe, and so Hume, or at least Philo, renders the existence of God improbable.<sup>9</sup>

8 All citations of the *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus* (*JBR*) will refer to the 1771 edition. All translations of *JBR* are my own.

9 For an argument that *Hume* aims to establish atheism, see Holden (2010).

## Conclusion

Problems of evil are indeed ancient, but *the* problem of evil of contemporary philosophy – a set of arguments targeting the existence of God – is very modern. It is noteworthy that even the expression, “*the* problem of evil,” is a latecomer; it was not common in English until the middle of the nineteenth century. However, when it began to appear frequently in print, it did not refer to any single problem. The expression certainly did not refer exclusively or even predominately to a threat to theism. In 1847, one of the earliest authors that I have found mentioning “the problem of evil” in fact goes out of his way to distance this problem from any concern for the existence of God: “It certainly does not touch the question of existence at a single point whatsoever. The dullest intellect must perceive this at once, without illustration, on the bare statement. The problem of the origin of evil has positively nothing to do with the proposition, that God is. It belongs to a very different category, the inquiry as to whether God is good” (Arrington 1847, 261).<sup>10</sup>

In 1849, another early author to use the expression “the problem of evil” also associated the subject with something other than atheism, in this case dualism. The first sentence of the author’s article entitled, “Evil,” reads: “We have no doubt that dualism, the doctrine of a good and an evil principle, rather than monotheism, a belief in one God, is the natural result of a philosophy unenlightened by revelation” (A.P.P. 1849, 227).<sup>11</sup> In attempting to explain the origin of evil, this Christian author is engaged in a project closer to Augustine’s or Bayle’s than to that of contemporary philosophers of religion.

Studying the history of philosophical problems often illuminates contemporary treatments of those problems. What might be the lesson of this history, which has shown us that evil has posed many problems in the last two millennia in the West, but has only recently been linked to atheism? The lesson might be that we confine ourselves to narrower conceptions of the first cause(s) today, that we have a more limited theological imagination, than our predecessors. Today, the problem of evil basically argues: *If there is a God, then He must possess attributes X, Y, Z. But evil shows that the first cause of the universe positively cannot (or probably does not) possess attributes X, Y, or Z. Therefore, there is (probably) not a God.* Evil calls God’s existence into question only if God’s nature can be pinned down (“He *must* possess attributes X, Y, Z”). With greater humility in our theological speculation, however, evil would not call the *existence* of a God immediately into question, but only our understanding of the ultimate cause or causes of the universe.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Samuel Newlands for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, and for his excellent graduate seminar in winter 2011 at Notre Dame on the history of the problem of evil.

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10 Arrington goes on to use the expression, “the problem of evil,” in the next sentence: “The problem of evil has been professedly solved in many opposite ways. Every creed presents its own solution” (Arrington 1847, 261).

11 “The problem of evil” is used at the later in this section.



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# The Logical Problem of Evil: Mackie and Plantinga

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It is customary to distinguish the logical problem of evil from the evidential problem of evil. An instance of the logical problem of evil is an argument from evil against the existence of God that has a premise that says the existence of God and some known fact about evil are incompatible, whereas an instance of the evidential problem of evil is an argument from evil against the existence of God that lacks such a premise. Consequently, an instance of the evidential problem of evil will either lack a premise that says that the existence of God is incompatible with some fact about evil, for example, Draper (1989) (see Chapter 5), or it will have such a premise but the putative fact about evil will be unknown but arguably probable or reasonable to believe or some such thing, for example, Rowe (1979) (see Chapter 4). The argument of Mackie (1955) is at present the most famous instance of the logical problem of evil.

The plan of the chapter is as follows. Section 1 states Mackie's argument and sketches a response to it in the spirit of what is badly named "skeptical theism" in contemporary philosophy of religion, a response suggested in Pike (1963) (see Chapter 29). Section 2 summarizes Plantinga's Free Will Defense, followed by a rehearsal of several objections to it in Section 3. One line of thought is developed at length in the remainder of Section 3 and in Section 4. In Section 5, I assess two published objections to that line of thought, one from Rowe and one from Plantinga.

## Mackie's Logical Problem of Evil

According to Mackie, not only can it be shown that "religious beliefs lack rational support," it can be shown that

they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another, so that the theologian . . . must be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be *disproved* from other beliefs that he also holds. (Mackie 1955, 200)

The putative disproof to which Mackie alludes is the problem of evil. As Mackie (1955, 200) conceived of it, the problem of evil is “a logical problem, the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs” that were “essential parts of most theological positions.” The three “beliefs” he had in mind were these: “God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists.” Mackie was aware that there was no obvious inconsistency here. Thus, he said,

to show it we need some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules connecting the terms “good,” and “evil,” and “omnipotent.” These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible. (Mackie 1955, 200–201)

Nearly 60 years have passed since Mackie published his “logical problem” of evil, as he called it. But what, exactly, is the argument? And what should we make of it?

At the most general level, it is this:

G: God is omnipotent and God is wholly good,

is incompatible with

E: Evil exists.

But E is true; so G is false. As for the incompatibility of G and E, Mackie said that all we needed to “show” it was

MP1: A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can,

and

L: There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

The idea is that the conjunction of G, MP1, and L entails the denial of E; alternatively, in any possible world in which G, MP1, and L are true, E is false.

We can begin to see the failure of Mackie’s argument by noting that the conjunction of G, MP1, and L entails the denial of E only if L and MP1 are both necessary truths. For if they are not both necessary truths, it is left wide open whether the goodness of a wholly good God requires Him to prevent evil as far as He can, or whether the power of an omnipotent God might not be enough to prevent evil entirely. MP1 and L are not both necessary truths, however.

Consider MP1. What if a wholly good thing had a morally justifying reason to permit some evil? In that case, it might well not eliminate evil as far as it can. MP1, therefore, is not necessarily true. A more plausible moral principle that avoids this objection and serves Mackie’s purposes is something along these lines:

MP2: A wholly good thing eliminates evil as far as it can, unless it has a morally justifying reason to permit evil.

It too, however, is objectionable. For MP2 can serve Mackie's purposes only if its conjunction with G and L preclude E; but that's the case only if it is a necessary truth that

N: There is no morally justifying reason for a wholly good thing to permit evil.

Nothing we know, however, precludes the possibility that

J: There is a morally justifying reason for God to permit evil, a reason we do not know of, and He permits it for that reason, and evil results.

Notice that J entails  $\sim$ N. So nothing we know of precludes the possibility of  $\sim$ N. But if nothing we know of precludes the possibility of  $\sim$ N, the incompatibility of G and E are hardly "shown" by way of MP2, L, and N. Furthermore, since nothing we know of precludes the possibility that G and J are both true, and the conjunction of G and J entails E, nothing we know of precludes the possibility that G and E are both true.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, for all we know, G and E are compatible.

The objection just stated targets MP1 of Mackie's original argument. Plantinga, however, targets L, arguing in various ways that L is false. But, as Plantinga saw, even if there are limits to what an omnipotent thing can do, it does not follow that G and E are compatible. To show that they are compatible, one must do something more. One must offer a defense.

## Plantinga's Free Will Defense

Plantinga identifies an attempt to show that G and E are compatible as a *defense*. A defense is like a theodicy – it specifies reasons that would justify God's permitting evil – but, unlike a theodicy, it does not aspire to specify reasons that involve good states of affairs that *in fact* obtain; rather, the reasons specified in a defense need only involve good states of affairs that *might* obtain (see Chapters 27 and 28).<sup>2</sup> More accurately, a defense aims to show that G and E are compatible by producing a proposition that specifies a justifying reason for God to permit evil, is compatible with G, and entails E in conjunction with G. Plantinga aims to find such a proposition in the following familiar story:

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He cannot cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they are not significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil, and He cannot give these creatures the freedom to perform evil

1 Mackie eventually gave up on the logical problem of evil contained in Mackie (1955). Instead, he offered a version of the evidential problem, what he called "the problem of unabsorbed evils," evils that would not be justifiedly permitted by God. See Mackie (1982, 150–176, especially 155).

2 This is not quite the way that Plantinga draws the distinction. He says that a theodocist aims "to tell us what God's reason for permitting evil *really* is," while a defender aims, at most, to say "what God's reason *might possibly be*" (Plantinga 1974b, 28). This way of drawing the line between theodicy and defense implies that God exists; the one in the text does not.

and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.<sup>3</sup> (Plantinga 1974b, 30)

This free will story – and the explanation of God's permission of evil that goes along with it – is subject to a devastating objection: even if some of the creatures God created were such that they would freely go wrong – indeed, even if *all* of them were such that they would freely go wrong – why could he not have just created other possible creatures who in the exercise of their freedom would always freely go right? Surely that was within his power (Mackie 1955, 209).

To meet this objection, Plantinga introduces transworld depravity (TWD) and applies it to individual essences:<sup>4</sup>

TWD: An essence *E* suffers from TWD if and only if for every world *W* such that *E* contains the properties *is significantly free in W* and *always does what is right in W*, there is an action *A* and a maximal (or “initial”) world segment *T* such that

- (1) *T* includes *E*'s being instantiated and *E*'s instantiation's being free with respect to *A* and *A*'s being morally significant for *E*'s instantiation,
- (2) *T* is included in *W* but includes neither *E*'s instantiation's performing *A* nor *E*'s instantiation's refraining from *A*, and
- (3) if *T* were actual, then the instantiation of *E* would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.<sup>5</sup>

(As Plantinga notes at 1974b, 48, we are to remember that (3) is not true at any world *W* that the definition quantifies over.) We can put this definition more briefly. Let “*E*+” be the instantiation of an essence *E*, let an “*E*-perfect world” be a world at which *E* is instantiated and *E*+ is significantly free and always does what is right, and let “*T*(*W*)” be the maximal world segment *T* described by (1) and (2) in world *W*. Then:

3 Some definitions of Plantinga's (1974b, 29–30) will be useful here. (1) If a person is *free with respect to a given action*, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he would not. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it. (2) An action is *morally significant*, for a given person, if it would be wrong for him to perform the action but right to refrain or *vice versa*. (3) A person is *significantly free*, at a time, if he is then free with respect to a morally significant action.

4 According to Plantinga, each thing that exists in any possible world has a unique (and perhaps complex) property that distinguishes that individual from every other possible thing. That property is an “individual essence.” Since an individual essence – or “essence,” for short – is a property, and properties necessarily exist, each essence exists at every possible world. Many individuals are contingent things, they do not exist at every possible world; nevertheless, their essences do.

5 Plantinga (1974b, 52–53); cf. Plantinga (1974a, 188). Plantinga confesses not to be entirely clear about how to spell out this notion of a maximal (or initial) world segment. A rough-and-ready expression of the idea is this: imagine a person who is free to do *A* at *t* and who is free to refrain from *A* at *t*. If she does *A* at *t*, then she brings it about that a certain world, *W*, is actual; however, if she refrains from *A* at *t*, she brings it about that another world, *W'*, is actual. Note that both *W* and *W'* share a segment of a world up until the time she acts or refrains from acting. A maximal (or initial) world segment is that segment of each of *W* and *W'* that is (intrinsically) the same up until *t*. For more on the matter, see Plantinga (1974a, 175–76; 1974b, 46; 1985, 50–52).

TWD: An essence *E* suffers from TWD if and only if for every *E*-perfect world *W*, there is an action *A* and a maximal world segment *T(W)* such that if *T(W)* were actual, *E*+ would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.

With TWD in hand, Plantinga puts forward the following proposition:

R: God created a world containing moral good; but, it was not within His power to create a world containing moral good without creating one containing moral evil since every essence suffers from TWD.

According to Plantinga, since R specifies a justifying reason for God to permit evil, is compatible with G, and entails E in conjunction with G, G and E are compatible.

What should we make of R? This much is true: *if* every essence suffers from TWD, then it was not within God's power to create a world containing moral good without creating one containing moral evil. For suppose there is a world *W* at which every essence suffers from TWD. Then, if *W* were actual, God would find Himself in this unfortunate situation: to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil, He must actualize *T(W)*; but, if God does that, then "no matter which essences [He] instantiates, the resulting persons, if free with respect to morally significant actions, would always perform at least some wrong actions."<sup>6</sup>

## Assessing Plantinga's Free Will Defense

According to Robert Adams (1985, 226), "it is fair to say that Plantinga has solved this problem. That is, he has argued convincingly for the consistency of [G and E]." And William Alston (1991, 49) writes that "Plantinga . . . has established the *possibility* that God could not actualize a world containing free creatures that always do the right thing." William Rowe (1979, 335, note 1) agrees:

Some philosophers have contended that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God. No one, I think, has succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim. Indeed, granted incompatibilism, there is a fairly compelling argument for the view that the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of the theistic God. (For a lucid statement of this argument, see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*.)

And James Beebe writes: "As an attempt to rebut the logical problem of evil, [Plantinga's FWD] is strikingly successful"; indeed, according to Beebe (2005, section 4) "all parties admit that Plantinga's [FWD] successfully rebuts the logical problem of evil as it was formulated by atheists during the mid-twentieth-century."

Beebe exaggerates, as do the others. Compatibilists, for example, deny the very possibility of incompatibilist freedom that Plantinga's FWD invokes. Furthermore, R is compatible with G only if G is possibly true; but G is possibly true if and only if it is possible that a *necessarily existing* and essentially omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being exists

6 Plantinga (1974b, 53). Since essences are necessary beings, God does *not* have the power to create essences other than those that exist and instantiate them.



(at any rate, that's the sort of God Plantinga has in mind for his FWD). To date, however, no one has ever shown that it is possible that such a being exists. In addition, Plantinga's FWD succeeds only if R is possibly true, and R is possibly true only if

D: Possibly, every essence suffers from TWD.

But here one might observe that D, with its explicit reference to TWD, is much less intuitive than the proposition in whose defense it is called to serve, that is, that G and E are compatible. Thus, on the general principle that the less intuitive cannot serve to show the more intuitive, R is useless in a defense of the compatibility of G and E (DeRose 1991). Finally, Richard Otte has demonstrated (Otte 2009), and Plantinga (2009, 183) concedes, that R is not only false, it is necessarily false: "on my original definition of TWD, R is necessarily false and therefore not compatible with anything, let alone G." Otte offers a new definition that skirts the objections he raises, and Plantinga adopts it for R. In what follows, I will stick to the original definition since the concern I want to express about Plantinga's FWD applies to it on either definition, and it would take us too far afield to summarize Otte's objections and new definition.

A defense aims to show that G and E are compatible by producing a proposition that specifies a justifying reason for God to permit evil, is compatible with G, and entails E in conjunction with G. This is insufficient for the purpose, however. For to show that G is compatible with E is in part an epistemological task; one succeeds at it only if it meets certain epistemic standards. Specifically, a defense succeeds only if it is not reasonable to refrain from believing the claims that constitute it. In the case of Plantinga's FWD, the central claim is that R is compatible with G. But, as noted earlier, R is compatible with G only if R is possible, and R is possible only if D is true, that is, only if, possibly, every essence suffers from TWD. But why suppose that's possible? Because, says Plantinga (1974a, 186, 188; 1974b, 53), it is "clearly" true.

In a nutshell, my objection to Plantinga's FWD is this: D is not at all "clearly" true; indeed, few things are more *unclearly* true than D (if it is true at all). In fact, it is reasonable to refrain from believing D; hence, Plantinga's FWD fails.

The reason why it is reasonable to refrain from believing D is that there is a proposition that we know is incompatible with D, and it is no more reasonable to believe D than it. That proposition is

S: Necessarily, some essence or other enjoys transworld sanctity (TWS),

where

TWS: An essence *E* enjoys *transworld sanctity* (TWS) if and only if for every world *W* such that *E* contains the properties *is significantly free in W* and *always does what is right in W*, there is **no** action *A* and **no** maximal world segment *T* such that

- (1) *T* includes *E*'s being instantiated and *E*'s instantiation being free with respect to *A* and *A*'s being morally significant for *E*'s instantiation,
- (2) *T* is included in *W* but includes neither *E*'s instantiation's performing *A* nor *E*'s instantiation's refraining from *A*, and
- (3) if *T* were actual, then the instantiation of *E* would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.



(Caution: *S* is *not* the proposition that some particular essence enjoys TWS essentially, which is impossible.) Using previous definitions, we can simplify:

TWS: An essence *E* enjoys TWS if and only if for every *E*-perfect world *W*, there is *no* action *A* and *no* maximal world segment *T(W)* such that if *T(W)* were actual, *E*+ would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.

And why believe that *S* is incompatible with *D*? Well, suppose they are compatible. Then there's a world at which every essence suffers from TWD and some essence enjoys TWS. That is, there's a world at which some essence, *E*, both suffers from TWD and enjoys TWS. Now consider any *E*-perfect world *W*. By TWD, there is some action *A* and some maximal world segment *T(W)* such that if *T(W)* were actual, *E*+ would have gone wrong with respect to *A*, but by TWS, there is no such action and no such maximal world segment. The supposition that *S* and *D* are compatible entails a contradiction; thus they are incompatible.

Of course, even if *S* is incompatible with *D*, it might be more reasonable to believe *D* than *S*. Why suppose it is not? In short, because suggestions to the contrary fail. For example, one might suggest that it is more reasonable to believe *D* than *S* since *D* is a possibility claim and *S* is a necessity claim. But, as Plantinga (2009, 185) agrees, "it is not the case that possibility claims automatically enjoy a leg up here. *Necessarily*,  $2 + 1 = 3$  is much less venturesome than *possibly*, *human beings are material objects*." A similar judgment falls on other suggestions.<sup>7</sup> What follows is a more positive case for the claim that it is not more reasonable to believe *D* than *S*, a case initially stated in Howard-Snyder and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1998).

## Interworld Plenitude and Intraworld Plenitude

Recall that each individual essence is a complex property and, as such, exists at every possible world, although no *creaturely* essence is instantiated at every world. Among the creaturely essences are those of which counterfactuals of freedom would be true or false of their instantiations. These are the essences with which we are concerned. Now consider any combination of counterfactuals of freedom, *C*, provided that it is possible for an essence to have *C* and *C* is sharable. (I leave this qualification tacit from here on out.) Here's a natural question: how many essences have *C*? There are different ways to answer this question, ways that reveal incompatible overarching pictures of the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences.

One way begins by acknowledging that it is difficult, indeed, practically impossible to say exactly how many essences have *C*, but what can be said is this: there is some world at which *no* essence has *C*, there is some world at which *some but not all* essences has *C*, and there is some world at which *every* essence has *C*. Indeed, for every permutation between none and every, there is some world at which that's how many essences have *C*. We can put the picture of the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences on offer a bit more precisely as follows:

<sup>7</sup> Howard-Snyder and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1998: 8–13).

*Weak Interworld Plenitude:* For any combination of counterfactuals of freedom, C, and for any quantifier Q, there is some world W such that Q-many essences at W have C.

Worlds can differ in a lot of ways other than how many essences have C. Suppose that, at W, n essences have C. Might not there be another world, W', such that, at W', n essences also have C, but W' differs from W in some other way? Indeed, if we countenance seriously the variety of ways in which worlds can differ independently of how many essences have C, we might naturally hypothesize that there are infinitely many worlds at which there are Q-many essences with C. That is,

*Strong Interworld Plenitude:* For any combination of counterfactuals of freedom, C, and for any quantifier Q, there are infinitely many worlds W such that Q-many essences at W have C.

Interworld Plenitude, whether weak or strong, is not the only answer to the question of how many essences have C. When for some combination of counterfactuals of freedom, C, we ask how many essences have it, we might wonder whether, for any difference with regard to counterfactuals of freedom that could hold between a pair of essences, there is at least one pair of essences at each world such that that difference holds between them. If we pursue this line of thought, a quite different answer to our question will come to mind, one that displays a plenitude of essences *at each and every* world rather than a plenitude of essences *across* worlds, as was the case with Interworld Plenitude. We can put this alternative picture of the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences a bit more precisely as follows:

*Weak Intraworld Plenitude:* For any combination of counterfactuals of freedom, C, and for any world W, some essence at W has C.

(Weak Intraworld Plenitude was first introduced in Howard-Snyder and O'Leary-Hawthorne 1998, 13.) Of course, essences can differ in a lot of ways other than having C. Suppose that, at W, E has C. Might not there be another essence, E', such that, at W, E' also has C while differing from E in some other way? Indeed, if we countenance seriously the variety of ways in which essences can differ independently of C, whether qualitatively or haecceitistically, we may well hypothesize that there are infinitely many essences at each world that have C. That is,

*Strong Intraworld Plenitude:* For any combination of counterfactuals of freedom, C, and for any world W, infinitely many essences at W have C.

Interworld Plenitude and Intraworld Plenitude constitute incompatible overarching pictures of the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences.<sup>8</sup> With these different pictures in mind, let us return to S and D:

- S: Necessarily, some essence or other enjoys TWS.
- D: Possibly, every essence suffers from TWD.

8 I owe the distinctions here to John Hawthorne.

Notice that whether an essence enjoys TWS or whether it suffers from TWD depends on what combination of counterfactuals of freedom it has. If it has a combination that includes a counterfactual according to which its instantiation would go wrong in the relevant conditions, then it suffers from TWD; if it includes no such counterfactual, then it enjoys TWS. Notice two other things as well: first, if Intraworld Plenitude accurately represents the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences, then S is true and D is false; second, if Interworld Plenitude accurately represents the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences, then S is false and D is true.

And now an important question arises: which picture (if either) accurately represents the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences? Each picture is internally consistent, and each is consistent with everything we know or reasonably believe. So which is it? I submit that none of us is in a position to answer that question. We are in no position to tell which picture (if either) is accurate. But in that case, we are in no position to tell whether S or D is true. And if we are in no position to tell whether S or D is true, then it is no more reasonable for us to believe D than S and, therefore, it is reasonable for us to refrain from believing D, in which case Plantinga's FWD fails.

## Two Objections

Rowe and Plantinga beg to differ (Rowe 1998; Plantinga 2009). At any rate, they have said some things against S and in favor of D.

According to Rowe, we have good reason to think that S is false. The reason is this. Begin with a toy model: "suppose that there are only two creaturely essences, E1 & E2" (Rowe 1998, 118). Suppose further, as is no doubt true, that no essence has either TWS or TWD essentially. In that case, says Rowe,  $\Diamond$  (E1 suffers from TWD) and  $\Diamond$  (E2 suffers from TWD). He continues: if at every world, some essence or other enjoys TWS, then, in our toy model, it is necessary that, if E1 is TWD, E2 is not TWD. "But clearly such a conditional cannot be necessary. For if it were and E1 were to suffer from TWD, it would not be up to E2 whether it suffers from TWD." The idea is that E1+'s freely doing wrong in the relevant initial world segment cannot entail E2+'s freely doing right in the relevant initial world segment; for, by definition of TWD, it is up to E2+ in the relevant initial world segment whether E2 suffers from TWD. Therefore, given our toy model,  $\Diamond$  (E1 suffers from TWD & E2 suffers from TWD); moreover, since there are no other essences in the model, it follows that, on the model, it is possible that every essence suffers from TWD. Rowe continues:

Now this may be all well and good. But what if it is not just two creaturely essences we are considering? What if there are many, perhaps infinitely many, essences we are considering? How can we be confident that  $\Diamond$  (every essence suffers from TWD)? (Rowe 1998, 119)

Good question. Here's Rowe's answer:

no matter how many conjuncts of the form "Ex suffers from TWD" fall within the scope of the possibility operator, the addition of any number of other such conjuncts cannot make it the case that the resulting conjunction is not logically possible. That being so, we can conclude that  $\Diamond$  [Every (creaturely) essence suffers from TWD].

Rowe's argument here is this: suppose that there are infinitely many propositions of the form  $\Diamond (Ex \text{ suffers from TWD})$ . Then, for infinitely many essences,  $\Diamond (E1 \text{ suffers from TWD} \ \& \ E2 \text{ suffers from TWD} \ \& \ E3 \text{ suffers from TWD} \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ En \text{ suffers from TWD} \ \& \ \dots)$ . Thus,  $\Diamond (\text{Every (creaturely) essence suffers from TWD})$ .

What should we make of this argument? Well, this much is true: given Intraworld Plenitude, the second inference is obviously invalid. That's because the possibility that infinitely many essences suffer from TWD (Rowe's premise) is compatible with Intraworld Plenitude, and Intraworld Plenitude entails that it is not possible that every creaturely essence suffers from TWD (the denial of Rowe's conclusion). Indeed, the strong version of Intraworld Plenitude entails both that infinitely many essences suffer from TWD and that infinitely many essences do not suffer from TWD. So, Rowe's second inference is valid only on the assumption that Intraworld Plenitude inaccurately represents the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences. Rowe is not entitled to that assumption, however; he is no position to say that Intraworld Plenitude is inaccurate.

Plantinga argues against S in a similar fashion. He writes:

Let  $\{E\}$  be the set of essences, and pick out any particular essence  $E^*$  you like. If (S) is true, then

Necessarily, if none of the members of  $\{\{E\}-E^*\}$  enjoy TWS, then  $E^*$  enjoys TWS.

But this seems paradoxical.  $E^*$ , of course, doesn't *essentially* enjoy TWS; but then why should the fact that these other essences don't enjoy TWS entail that  $E^*$  does? What does their having or lacking that property have to do with  $E^*$ 's having or lacking it? (Plantinga 2009, 187–188)

From the point of view of Intraworld Plenitude (the strong version), nothing here is the least bit paradoxical since, from that point of view,  $\{E\}$  has infinitely many members that enjoy TWS, and so  $\{\{E\}-E^*\}$  has infinitely members that enjoy TWS as well. So from the point of view of Intraworld Plenitude, the antecedent of the conditional that Plantinga asks us to consider is impossible, that is, it is impossible that “none of the members of  $\{\{E\}-E^*\}$  enjoy TWS.” There are different views about how to interpret conditionals with impossible antecedents and what truth-values to assign them. Whichever view you like best, use it here as you do elsewhere. No paradox in that; at least no paradox above and beyond the view you use. As for the questions Plantinga asks in an effort to induce an air of paradoxicality, note that, from the point of view of Intraworld Plenitude, the first question – “why should the fact that these other essences do not enjoy TWS entail that  $E^*$  does?” – employs a false presupposition, namely that it is a fact that these other essences do not enjoy TWS; and the second question – “What does their having or lacking that property have to do with  $E^*$ 's having or lacking it?” – is properly and unparadoxically answered by: nothing at all.

Plantinga (2009, 187) also adduces against S the thought that “There is no structural reason why at least one of the essences must enjoy TWS.” Plantinga does not make plain what he means by a “structural reason,” but it is clear that, from the point of view of Intraworld Plenitude, there's a plain old vanilla reason why at least one of the essences must enjoy TWS, namely this: whether an essence enjoys TWS depends on what combination of counterfactuals of freedom it has, and for any combination of counterfactuals of freedom, C, and for any world W, infinitely many essences at W have C.

So far as I can see, Rowe's and Plantinga's reasons against S assume that Intraworld Plenitude inaccurately represents the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences. Neither of them is entitled to that assumption, however.

Plantinga goes further, however. He claims not only to have provided reasons for denying S; he claims that "(S) has no intuitive support" and that "its denial ( $\sim$ S) . . . enjoys intuitive support." In defense of the first claim, he writes:

True: it certainly seems *possible* that some essence enjoys TWS. Further, perhaps some essence actually has that property; but why think it's *necessary* that this be so? This proposition simply doesn't *seem* to be necessary. (Plantinga 2009, 188)

What should we make of these words? Four observations are pertinent.

First, from the point of view of Intraworld Plenitude, there is a perfectly good reason why it is necessary that some essence enjoys TWS.

Second, the claim that "the proposition that *some essence enjoys TWS* does not seem necessary" is ambiguous between (i) it is not the case that the proposition that *some essence enjoys TWS* seems necessary and (ii) it seems that the proposition that *some essence enjoys TWS* is not necessary. The placement of the negation operator matters. Since Plantinga is defending the claim that S *lacks* intuitive support, I take it that he means (i) and not (ii).

Third, when a charitable interpreter hears someone claim something of the form "it's not the case that p seems necessary," she will not hear "it's not the case that p seems necessary to the citizens of the grand State of Washington"; nor will she hear "it's not the case that p seems necessary to the general public." No, what she'll hear is this: "it's not the case that p seems necessary to me." I take it that when Plantinga claims that it is not the case that *some essence enjoys TWS* seems necessary, he is not attributing a lack of certain seeming states to the citizens of Washington, or the general public, or some such thing; rather, he's attributing a certain lack of a seeming state to himself: "it's not the case that the proposition that *some essence enjoys TWS* seems necessary to me."

Fourth, a claim of the form "it's not the case that p seems necessary to x" is primarily a claim about x. A claim of the form "p has no intuitive support" is a claim primarily about p; it attributes to p the lack of a certain property, or the logical complement of the property of enjoying intuitive support. Now, Plantinga claims that "(S) has no intuitive support." What he gives us is "it's not the case that *some essence enjoys TWS* seems necessary to me," that is, to Plantinga himself. Here we must exercise caution. An introductory logic student does not grasp the necessity of the corresponding conditional for *modus ponens*. "It doesn't seem necessary to me!" he exclaims with exasperation. Should we infer that *it* – the proposition that, *necessarily, if p and p only if q, then q* – lacks intuitive support? Hardly. The same goes for Plantinga. Fair enough: it is not the case that the proposition that *some essence enjoys TWS* seems necessary to him. But let us not get carried away. It hardly follows that S fails to enjoy intuitive support.

Now, despite what Plantinga has to say in defense of the claim that S fails to enjoy intuitive support, I expect that he is right. That is because I expect that nearly no one with competence to understand S would be the least bit intellectually attracted to it. So I concede Plantinga's first claim.

What about his second claim: "( $\sim$ S) . . . itself enjoys intuitive support"? As with his first claim, we must exercise caution. It is one thing for a particular proposition to seem true to you; it is quite another for *it* to have a certain property, the property of enjoying intuitive

support. We meet a resident at the local psychiatric ward who claims to be Napoleon Bonaparte. No doubt it seems to him that the proposition that *he is Napoleon Bonaparte* is true. But do you really want to say that *that* proposition thereby enjoys intuitive support? Of course not. Likewise for Plantinga. No doubt it seems to him that the proposition that *possibly, no essence enjoys TWS* is true. But let us not jump to conclusions. In particular, let us not jump to the conclusion that *possibly, no essence enjoys TWS* thereby enjoys intuitive support.

Here is what Plantinga says on behalf of his claim that  $\sim S$  enjoys intuitive support:

Why couldn't it be that no essence enjoys this property? That wouldn't require, of course, that any essence suffer from TWD; it requires only that for each essence *E* there is a world *W* and [initial world segment *T(W)*] such that if [*T(W)*] were actual, *E+* would have gone wrong on at least one occasion. More simply, what it requires is that for each essence *E* there is some set *S* of circumstances such that if *S* had been actual, *E+* would have done something wrong. Doesn't that seem possible? (Plantinga 2009, 188)

I have two things to say about these words.

First, as for the initial question – Why could it not be that no essence enjoys TWS? – the answer from the point of view of Intraworld Plenitude is this: it could not be that *no* essence enjoys TWS because whether an essence enjoys TWS depends on what combination of counterfactuals of freedom it has, and for *any* combination of counterfactuals of freedom, *C*, and for *any* world *W*, at least *some* essence at *W*, perhaps even infinitely many, has *C*. Of course, I'm not suggesting that this answer is correct. I am merely pointing out that it is an answer to Plantinga's question. Perhaps a more important question than Plantinga's initial question is this: what reason does Plantinga, Rowe, or anyone else for that matter, have to presuppose that Intraworld Plenitude inaccurately represents the distribution of counterfactuals of freedom to essences?

Second, Plantinga reminds us that all it takes for it to be possible that no essence is TWS is for it to be possible that “for each essence *E* there is a [*n E*-perfect] world *W* and [initial world segment *T(W)*] such that if [*T(W)*] were actual, *E+* would have gone wrong on at least one occasion.” Then he asks: “Doesn't that seem possible?” Notice that Plantinga is not asking whether it seems possible that for *some* essence *E*, there is an *E*-perfect world *W* and initial world segment *T(W)* such that if *T(W)* were actual, *E+* would have gone wrong at least once. Rather, he is asking whether it seems possible that for *each and every* essence *E*, there is an *E*-perfect world *W* and initial world segment *T(W)* such that if *T(W)* were actual, *E+* would have gone wrong at least once. Moreover, he is *not* asking whether it is an epistemic possibility. That is, he is not asking whether *for all anyone one knows* – or, perhaps, whether for all you, his reader, knows – every essence is such that there is an *E*-perfect world *W* and initial world segment *T(W)* such that if *T(W)* were actual, *E+* would have gone wrong at least once.<sup>9</sup> No, Plantinga is asking a question about how the counterfactuals of freedom might be distributed to individual essences. In particular, he is asking whether it seems that there is a possible world at which the following is true: for each and every essence *E*, there is some world *W* such that *E* contains the properties *is significantly*

9 That sensible option was offered to him in Howard-Snyder and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1998, 14–18), but he rejected it.

*free in W* and *always does what is right in W*, and there is some initial world segment  $T(W)$  and some action  $A$  such that

- (1)  $T(W)$  includes *E's being instantiated* and *E+'s being free with respect to A* and *A's being morally significant for E+*,
- (2)  $T(W)$  is included in  $W$  but includes neither *E+'s performing A* nor *E+'s refraining from A*, and
- (3) if  $T(W)$  were actual,  $E+$  would have gone wrong on at least one occasion.

Well, each of us will have to answer Plantinga's question – "Doesn't that seem possible?" – for himself. For my own part, I can assure you that it is not the case that it seems to me that there is a world at which every single essence satisfies Plantinga's description. (Of course, neither is it the case that it seems to me that there is no such world; but that is beside the present point.)

The more important point here is this. Plantinga's bare appeal to intuition is a bit lagging behind the times. That's not to say that intuition *per se* is a bad thing. Rather, it is to say that at this point in the conversation we need some reason, *any reason at all*, to suppose that counterfactuals of freedom fall out in such a way that it is possible that no essence is TWS. For if Intraworld Plenitude accurately represents the modal terrain in this area, then it is necessary that some essence or other is TWS and its seeming to Plantinga that it is not necessary leads him to falsehood. But Plantinga has no good reason to suppose that Intraworld Plenitude is inaccurate. If he did, he would have told us about it. No, the fact is that, like the rest of us, he is completely in the dark about the matter. Consequently, like the rest of us, he should refrain from believing  $\sim S$  on the basis of its seeming to him that it is possible that no essence enjoys TWS.

So much for Plantinga's case against  $S$ . What does he have to say on behalf of  $D$ ? Forty years ago, he declared it "clearly" true and left it at that. He has a bit more to say now. Here it is in its entirety:

When I think hard about (D) it seems to me to be true. Doesn't it seem possible that the counterfactuals of freedom should fall out in such a way that each essence  $E$  is such that for every  $E$ -perfect world, there is some initial segment of that world such that if that segment were actual (if God weakly actualized it)  $E$  would go wrong with respect to some action? What would prevent them from falling out that way? (D) does have intuitive support. And it isn't as if (D) is one of those peculiar propositions such that both they and their denials seem to have intuitive support:

( $\sim D$ ) Necessarily, some essences do not suffer from TWD

does not have intuitive support. There seems no reason at all to think it must be the case that some essences do not display TWD.

So I say (D) has intuitive support; it seems true (Plantinga 2009, 188).

Do these words constitute an advance over Plantinga's 1974 declaration that  $D$  is "clearly" true?

Unfortunately, they do not. For, first of all, nobody in the conversation ever suggested that "(D) is one of those peculiar propositions such that both they and their denials seem to have intuitive support." Second, we see twice more Plantinga's predilection to the "p



seems to me true; so, p has intuitive support” fallacy. Perhaps if he made a case for thinking that D seemed to be true to a representative sample of humanity (or even a representative sample of those competent to understand it), that would go some way toward supporting his claim that D has intuitive support. But, absent evidence like that, we have no reason at all to suppose that D enjoys intuitive support. Third, we see a new way to declare that D is “clearly” true, a way that deploys the currently fashionable jargon of seems-talk: “it seems to me to be true.” No advance there. We already knew that. Finally, we are offered a question in an apparent effort to pump our intuitions: what would prevent the counterfactuals of freedom from falling out in such a way that, possibly, every essence suffers from TWD? But the answer to that question should be clear: Intraworld Plenitude. That is what would prevent the counterfactuals of freedom from falling out that way.

What we need at this point in the conversation is some good reason to favor Interworld Plenitude, or something functionally comparable with it, over Intraworld Plenitude. That would advance the conversation. But Plantinga gives us no such thing. Instead, he dolls up his 1974 line that D is “clearly” true in a chic new skirt: “D seems to me to be true.” At best, that is a conversation stopper.

## Further Reading

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# A New Logical Problem of Evil

J.L. SCHELLENBERG

The old logical problem of evil, a problem familiar from Epicurus and Hume and formalized by Mackie (1955, 1982), utilizes certain alleged consequences of omnipotence and omnibenevolence to argue that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of God (see Chapter 2). This problem is often held to have been solved in our own day by Alvin Plantinga (1974). Plantinga cuts a wide swath through contemporary philosophy of religion, and most agree that with his famous Free Will Defense, he carries the old logical problem of evil away with him.

Of course the problem is not *called* old by many or any who feel this way. That is my term, used to highlight the fact that even if Plantinga's efforts against the problem as set out by Mackie were to be entirely successful (and I do not believe they are), there might still be some other way – perhaps there are many ways – of producing the relevant inconsistency result. To show that this is indeed a fact, it would be useful to have before us a vivid example of a new logical problem of evil. I have therefore decided to provide one. And since the most interesting new version of the problem would approximate the *generality* of the old (though with greater resistance to Plantinga-style solutions), it is on such a problem that I have set my sights.<sup>1</sup>

We can find it, so I suggest, by focusing on the transition theists must rationalize from God *without* evil *prior* to creation – “prior” here may be taken logically or temporally or in both senses – to God *with* evil *after*. No such transition, so it may be argued, is metaphysically possible. The key thought can be put in the form of a slogan: in any possible world, including God, once purely good, always purely good. (What we have here is something like a theological analogue of Newton's First Law of Motion.) Another way of putting

<sup>1</sup> By generality, I mean reference to the existence of *any evil at all*. (A version of the logical problem of evil focused more specifically on horrors is developed in chapter 11 of Schellenberg 2007.)

it is: no evil before creation, no evil after. Let us consider now how such slogans may be turned into reasoning.<sup>2</sup>

### Three Commitments of Theism

I begin by identifying three claims about God which traditional theists uncontroversially must regard as necessary truths. These claims have us starting “farther back” metaphysically and axiologically – with more fundamental matters – than the old logical problem’s claims about God’s maximally great power and benevolence. But, as we shall see, they can play a similar role in an inconsistency proof.

The first of the three concerns the *unsurpassable greatness* of God:

*Unsurpassable Greatness:* God is the greatest possible being.

This claim is generally upheld by contemporary theistic philosophers. We can get clearer about it by considering some comments made by one of them, Peter van Inwagen, in his recent Gifford Lectures. In Lecture 2, which addresses “The Idea of God,” van Inwagen (2006, 34) says this: “In the strictest sense, the concept of God is the concept of a greatest possible being.” He adds the following in a note: “The concept of God should be understood in this way: the concept of God is the concept of a *person* who is the greatest possible being.” Quite properly, van Inwagen (2006, 158) points out that this “is not the same as saying that the concept of God is the concept of a greatest possible person.” Of course, God has to be the greatest possible person *too*, but the idea of a greatest possible being has priority; theism is what you get when this more general religious idea is filled out personalistically, with all the references to unlimited power, knowledge, moral goodness, and so on, that this requires.

The second theistic commitment I have in mind concerns God’s *ontological independence* from any created reality:

*Ontological Independence:* No world created by God (or any part thereof) is a part of God.<sup>3</sup>

Religious views that are theistic regard God as *one* thing and the world as *another*. The world, for theism, is limited (even if it may sometimes also be regarded as infinite in certain respects, e.g., in duration) and surpassable, at least by God, whereas God, as we have seen, is unsurpassably great. The world depends on God; God does not depend on the world. The world is created by God; nothing creates God. And so on.

The third theistic commitment I want to expose is in some ways the most important here. I call it a commitment to *prior purity*:

2 A similar slogan can be extracted from a subtle and interesting paper by Nicholas Everitt (2006). But Everitt’s argument is not an argument from evil – it focuses on the contingency attaching to any world – and his way of moving from slogan to argument is different from mine.

3 In this chapter, “world” normally refers to an imagined or actual reality that would be or is ontologically distinct from God and that, if God exists, depends or would depend for its existence on God’s creative activity. “The” world (or “this” world or “our” world) is the world in which we live. When instead I have in mind the larger notion of a possible world, such as the actual world, which for theists includes both God and any created reality, I shall make this clear through the relevant use of such words as “possible” or “actual.”

*Prior Purity*: Prior to creation (whether “prior” be taken logically or temporally) there is no evil in God of any kind.

Eventually in the reasoning to come, we will reach a claim we might speak of in terms of *posterior* purity. But the theist’s commitment to Prior Purity will shape some of the premises of that reasoning. Though neglected – its neglect is one of the things I hope to remedy – this claim too should upon reflection seem entirely uncontroversial to any theist. And it too has to be regarded as necessarily true. For it is surely true by definition that God realizes the unblemished ideal of a reality unlimitedly and exclusively good.<sup>4</sup>

Now some theists – though not all – will want to say that God *suffers* in response to *our* suffering, and that this contributes to God’s greatness (see Chapter 18). Perhaps God’s righteous wrath will also be cited, which, even if righteous, could hardly be pleasant. So if you think of the usage of “evil” in philosophy as covering all suffering and any unpleasantness, you may think that there will be doubt, for at least some theists in the audience of my argument, as to whether my claim concerning no evil in God is a necessary truth. But Prior Purity avoids entanglement in this issue precisely through the qualifier “prior.”

## Developing the Proof: The Modeling Approach

We may now try to show how one could argue that the conjunction of these three claims is implicitly inconsistent with a fourth, to which theists are equally committed:

*Evil*: There is evil in the world.

There are at least two ways of pursuing this aim. Each introduces propositions additional to the four already mentioned, but in accordance with the usual procedure for establishing logical inconsistency, I shall seek to ensure that each additional proposition is (or can be made) clearly recognizable as a necessary truth. In many cases – but not all – this will be a matter of teasing out implications of Unsurpassable Greatness, Ontological Independence, or Prior Purity.<sup>5</sup> I shall likewise seek to ensure that all of the inferences made in the proofs are simple ones and obviously deductively valid.

The first of the two ways takes what I call a *modeling* approach, arguing that the goodness of any world created by God would model God’s goodness. Let us begin by identifying a logical consequence of Unsurpassable Greatness and Ontological Independence taken together. (We might think of it in terms of “prior completeness.”) What I have in mind, to a first approximation, is that prior to creation *all goods are already contained in God*.

The central idea here is common among Anselmians – those most closely associated with perfect being theology. Here is an Anselmian as good as any, Anselm himself, endorses-

4 It may be that Prior Purity follows from Unsurpassable Greatness. But even if so, it is a neglected entailment, and it will be doing important work for me, sometimes on its own. And these points justify treating it separately.

5 Certain of these propositions, just like the three commitments, would not rightly be regarded as necessary truths *by nontheists* without the addition, at the appropriate place, of the phrase “if God exists.” But because it would be awkward to continually employ this phrase, and because theists will regard the relevant propositions as necessary truths without it, I have left it tacit.

ing it: “Now, one thing is necessary, viz., that one necessary Being in which there is every good – or better, who is every good, one good, complete good, and the only good” (Anselm of Canterbury [1077] 1974, chapter 23). Clearly it is Unsurpassable Greatness that makes Anselmians speak thus. Peter van Inwagen (2006, 30), whom we found emphasizing that proposition earlier, puts the point this way: “All goods are already contained – full and perfect and complete – in God.” The religious experiences and reflections of many confirm that the idea of God is the idea of a reality whose greatness is *unlimited* in a sense that would be hard to endorse were we to think that in *no* sense are *all* goods in God. (Anyone denying this but still purporting to use the idea of God in philosophy is not doing philosophy of *religion* but, at best, metaphysics.) But how should we understand this common view that all goods are in God?

What people who accept the view may sometimes have in mind is the following: if God is unsurpassably great, then every *type* of good is realized in God. Presumably we should not expect to find every *token* – God, one might think, has not felt the pleasure I feel by riding a bicycle full tilt down a gravel road on the Manitoba prairie, with the wind whistling in my hair. But one wonders whether there is not a type of good here too – pleasurable bike riding – that God can’t in the relevant way exhibit. If so, it is hard to see how our first interpretive suggestion could be correct.

However a more modest suggestion about types can still be made, and it will be perfectly sufficient to represent at any rate a significant part of the content of the view we are interpreting – and sufficient also for my argument: *for every possible good, among the distinguishable good-types it tokens or instances is at least one instanced in God*. This should strike the reflective theist as clearly true. For suppose it is not true. Then there is a possible good such that, no matter how far one goes in sorting through the various types of goodness to which it belongs, no matter how general and fundamental a form of goodness is reached, never will one find a type of goodness that is in God. And this seems absurd, if God is unsurpassably great and if – in some pertinent sense – all goods are in God. Whatever one says about other goods, surely the most general and fundamental goods could not be thus *independent* of God’s goodness on the theistic conception of God’s greatness. God would not be the ultimate reality but rather just one good thing alongside others if that were so. Apply this to the bike-riding example. Perhaps pleasurable bike riding is never experienced by God, but goodness in God still shares something with any instance of that good by virtue of the fact that goodness in God includes an instance of some general type of goodness to which the instance of pleasurable bike riding also belongs – perhaps this type is that of pleasure or excitement, or perhaps we need to speak here of some even broader type of positive state of mind which goods of *those* types exemplify (maybe one representing distant reaches of unsurpassable greatness no human being could ever survey).

Now given Ontological Independence, the view I have been explaining clearly must apply to God *prior to creation*. This should be kept in mind as I briefly fill out a point suggested by the previous paragraph, one entailed specifically by Unsurpassable Greatness and needed, I think, to bring out a vital part of what is meant when theists say that all goods are in God. This is that the instancing in God of the relevant type of good is *far better* than any other possible instancing. And so a theist will say, for example, that the good of the rich green of his freshly cut lawn belongs to a more general good-type – beauty – that is also instanced in God prior to creation and in a manner that is unsurpassably great, greater far than the good of his green lawn. I shall take this point, as well as that of the previous paragraph, to be summarized in the following proposition, which gives us the refined

version of (at any rate a significant part of) the idea that all goods are in God, as well as the first premise of our proof:

- (1) Every possible non-Divine good is greatly exceeded by a good of the same type existing in God prior to creation.

Given Ontological Independence, it evidently follows from (1) that

- (2) Every good *in a world* is greatly exceeded by a good of the same type existing in God prior to creation.

Notice that the goods referred to by (2) must include both individual isolated goods as well as total arrangements of goodness in a world. I add now a central premise of the proof, which follows from Prior Purity:

- (3) All goodness found in God prior to creation is pure goodness: goodness-without-evil.

This premise allows us to conclude, from the conjunction of (2) and (3), that

- (4) Every good in a world is greatly exceeded by a *pure* good of the same type existing in God prior to creation.

And from (4) it clearly follows that

- (5) Every worldly good *that permits or requires evil* is greatly exceeded by a pure good of the same type existing in God prior to creation.

This is interesting. What it forces us to notice and take seriously is that since (say) instances of courage and compassion presuppose evil or its permission, *these* goods cannot exist in God prior to creation. And yet God is then unsurpassably great! Moreover, God's greatness includes instantings of certain general sorts of good realized by instances of courage and compassion that are far greater than the latter goods, and these Divine goods can get along just fine without evil ever in any way coming into the picture. But then we might start to think about how the unsurpassably great goodness of God, which is pure, could be made to infuse a *world*, and about how, given (5), God could hardly do better than to create such a world. Certainly there would be no reason to weep for the absence of courage and compassion.

What I have in mind here is that a world could contain goods that "model" Divine goods both in richness and purity: any good that purely resembles or images or mirrors or reflects a pure good in God we might think of as *modeling* that good. (I understand this notion broadly. Note especially that while every worldly good instances a higher goodness in God, the modeling goods need not be instances of *the goods they model*: the latter is but one way in which modeling can occur.) Now just which goods we are speaking about here – goods that are modeled and goods that do the modeling – may of course be difficult to say. This is in part because the higher goods in God may be impossible for us to specify, since not at all a part of our experience. So how can we get so much as a sense of how good worlds with modeling goods would be? But even without being able to identify particular relevant

goods, we can still quickly identify at least three ways in which a world with finite creatures but without evil could be made to grow *ceaselessly* in its pure reflection of the higher goods that exist without evil in God: through creatures' propositional understanding of the pure nature of God being ever more enlarged; through their experiential "knowledge by acquaintance" of God's pure reality being ever more enriched; and by the higher goodness that is in God being ever more fully embodied by creatures through what they do to become like God and to make their world reflect God's pure goodness. And we can add a fourth way if we think of these three combined. Accordingly, let us assume hereafter that any world whose goods are modeling goods attains a level of goodness no less pure or rich than would result from the realization of this fourth way.

What the defender of our new logical problem of evil can now say is that any world so purely and richly modeling goodness in God must – given what (5) has told us – be greater than any world with goods of the same type that are evil-involving. In other words:

- (6) If every worldly good that permits or requires evil is greatly exceeded by a pure good of the same type, existing prior to creation in God, then any world with goods permitting or requiring evil is exceeded by a world modeling the corresponding pure goods in God.

And (6) in conjunction with (5) entails that

- (7) Any world with goods permitting or requiring evil is exceeded by a world modeling the corresponding pure goods in God (call the latter a "greater world").

This too is interesting! Finite persons with access to those higher features of the Divine nature would more closely approach the Divine nature than persons with access only to such qualities as courage and compassion. Of course, the persons I have mentioned might not be us, but unlike theologians, philosophers surely cannot presume that the finite beings who would exist if there were a God would be human beings!

But can God ensure the existence of greater worlds? (Are they even possible?) To some extent we have already seen that the answer is yes. But to help us see this with perfect clarity, and to help us see, indeed, that God can in an important sense ensure the existence of greater worlds *limitlessly*, I will offer some (as we may call them) therapeutic observations. These are needed because, for humans, goodness is rarely encountered cleanly: most of us have to cobble together what value we can in the midst of considerable suffering; evil is always near at hand in our world. On account of this fact, it can be hard for us to imagine creaturely good without evil. We say – of some instance of courage or compassion, perhaps – "how could this good exist without evil or the possibility of evil?" And we suppose that the possibility of having such great goods would be reason enough for God to permit evil. We suppose that there may be many unknown evil-permitting or evil-requiring goods we would feel similarly about should we come to know them. In general, we imagine that a world without such goods would be somewhat flat and uninteresting and unchallenging – a "toy-world," as one prominent theistic philosopher has put it (Swinburne 2004, 264).

But if we resist prejudice, and think a bit longer about what we have already seen in the foregoing reasoning, we will achieve some interesting insights – ones normally overlooked. Restricting ourselves in thought to worlds without evil is no restriction at all if we are talking about the creation of a God who intends to open up avenues, for finite persons,

leading to the experience and embodiment of supreme value. Given Prior Purity together with Unsurpassable Greatness, there is no limit to the richness of value assimilable, without evil, by finite persons in pursuit of the infinite.

The point is that to improve itself, a finite world must, as it were, seek to close the distance between itself and God – an incompletable task, to be sure, and one that could find limitlessly many forms, but this is nonetheless the direction such value-related endeavor must take, and in this direction there is no evil to be encountered. Finite created persons could grow infinitely, developing knowledge and experience of God and the world ever more comprehensive and fine-grained. The greatness of God could be reflected in them and in the content of their growing awareness. What one has to try to imagine here is the following sort of thing: an eternal process, limitless in its variations (perhaps the one world created by God will be a conjunction of worlds), with each one featuring new finite persons starting at different levels (and entering into different dimensions) of genuine and pure awareness, experience, and embodiment of the Divine Person, from the least fully formed and moving up the ladder infinitely, with each finite person *growing* from there infinitely. There can, to coin an expression, be new infinities of finite pure goodness infinitely, if their source is God and their task is to reflect the glory and richness of God.

That concludes my explanation and defense of the idea that

- (8) God can ensure the existence of greater worlds, and can do so limitlessly.

Obviously what we now need, in the proof, is something about whether we should ever expect God to do *otherwise*. The proof's defender will say that the answer is clearly no. We can see what I have in mind by taking (7) and (8) together and letting them form the antecedent of another, rather important conditional proposition:

- (9) If any world with goods permitting or requiring evil is exceeded by a world modeling the corresponding pure goods in God and the existence of greater worlds can limitlessly be ensured by God, then for any world X that requires or permits evil, there is some world Y that models pure goodness in God such that God has no good reason to create X rather than Y.<sup>6</sup>

Of course the conjunction of (7), (8), and (9) yields

- (10) For any world X that requires or permits evil, there is some world Y that models pure goodness in God such that God has no good reason to create X rather than Y.

Let us pause for a moment and see just how plausible (9) is. There are some important conceptual distinctions to take account of in understanding the content of its antecedent. It is one thing for X to be less great than Y, another for X to contribute less well than Y to representing the good that is in God, and yet another for X, unlike Y, to permit or require evil. (Of course, these things may be related in various ways.) If the antecedent of (9) is true, then for any world X that requires or permits evil, there is always some world Y God

6 Here I have been much helped by an anonymous reviewer of the chapter.



can produce in relation to which it falls short in *all three* of these ways. In such circumstances, God could not acquire a good reason to create X rather than Y.

For a lesser world is indeed lesser, and this fact about it is not obviously made less noteworthy by recent discussions of whether God must choose the best or the better (see Chapter 16). Giving due attention to Robert Adams (1999, 170) when he writes that the relevant Divine disposition “is grace, in the sense that it is not grounded in the comparative degree of excellence of its object but finds its reasons in a noncomparative appreciation of its object,” we may still want to respond with a “Yes, but. . .” Yes, but comparative judgments are inevitable given omniscience, and we should not expect God to ignore the defeaters for any alleged reasons to permit evil provided by them. Indeed, we seem to have something like a false either/or here and no reason to permit finite goods involving evil at all, since both comparative judgments *and* grace may be exercised simultaneously even where evil is nowhere to be found: God, we must expect, will be aware of the comparative worth of greater worlds and also noncomparatively appreciate them, and the latter disposition must *always* involve grace, if, as Adams (1999, 151) himself says, “no finite excellence could deserve the love of such a transcendent being.”

Furthermore, should we not expect less appreciation for lesser worlds than for greater ones? Noncomparative appreciation presumably still comes in degrees; some objects will be capable of evoking less of it than others. And if a world X is less great than a world Y, would not a rational and appropriately sensitive omniscient being who noncomparatively appreciates all goods nonetheless appreciate X less than Y? Would not the texture of God’s love be in the relevant way matched to the texture of its object? Notice we do not have to say that X’s comparative inferiority is taken as a *reason* to appreciate X less deeply than Y. No, we can say instead that in a well-functioning omniscient appreciator, X’s noted inferiority (inevitable, as we have seen) or simply awareness of the facts that would justify such a judgment will naturally *cause* a less deep noncomparative appreciation for X. And it seems we must endorse a parallel point in relation to evil: in a well-functioning omniscient appreciator, the properties making something evil will just naturally cause *disappreciation*. Thus, we appear to have a couple of points to add to the three we have already identified in connection with (9)’s antecedent: world X will also win a less deep noncomparative appreciation from God than Y, and, unlike Y, which warrants no disappreciation at all, X or its conditions must furthermore win some *disappreciation*, insofar as they are bound up with evil. Such facts contribute to the overwhelmingly powerful defeater that a God would have for any reason apparently supporting the permission of evil.

As for less faithfully representing the pure goodness of God: how could this quality fail to be given weight by a theist who has reflected sufficiently on Unsurpassable Greatness and who is devoted above all to appreciating *God*? And there is a deeper point here, too: the good of finite beings in a world including God is bound up with growing more fully into a multifaceted awareness of God, and this, given Prior Purity, evil could only hinder.

The reference to X’s being bound up with evil deserves its own paragraph(s). Perhaps some philosophers would contest the idea that the presence or possibility of evil is something that would in itself be given weight by a Divine mind. But consider the infinitely good life of God, as imagined by theism. Suppose – perhaps *per impossibile* – that there could be a counterpart life *as* valuable, though included in it was some evil-turned-to-good. If the relevant facts about evil were not independently forceful, should it not be a matter of indifference *which* life God led? And yet for the theist it emphatically is not. God, as we have seen, realizes the unblemished ideal of a reality unlimitedly and exclusively good.

There appears to be an intuition about purity, and perhaps also about simplicity, operating at a meta-level here. God is a less pure reality if evil as well as good is realized in God – and God is a less simple being if, of the available options, evil and good, both appear in God. The logical argument from evil can make use of these ideas. For is not the presence or possibility of its diminished purity and simplicity, in these senses, going to detract at the meta-level in question from what God sees when God considers X?

A point about moral agency strengthens this as a conclusion that not just theists should accept. Evil is evil. That one situation includes it or makes it possible when a second does not should matter. Here, we have *a* reason at any rate for a perfectly good person not to bring about the existence of X. Notice that when we positively evaluate her refraining from doing so, our positive evaluation applies to *the disposition of the agent* as opposed to the state of affairs that results from her possession of this disposition.

With these points I hope to have clarified and adequately defended (9) and (therefore) (10). (9) is of course a central premise of the proof. That is why I spent so much time displaying its plausibility! The advocate of our proof may hope that by now we have made it obvious, since we have found both comparative and noncomparative grounds aplenty that jointly must prevent God from having any good reason to seek to realize, of the two worlds mentioned, X rather than Y. But surely the following is a necessary truth:

- (11) If for any world X that requires or permits evil there is some world Y that models pure goodness in God such that God has no good reason to create X rather than Y, then God has no good reason to permit evil in the world.

And of course it follows from the conjunction of (10) and (11) that

- (12) God has no good reason to permit evil in the world.

This sets up the final premise of the proof, according to which

- (13) If there is evil in the world, then God has a good reason to permit it.

Here we are reminded of something emphasized by philosophers of religion when, in the wake of Plantinga's influential Free Will Defense, they turned from the logical problem of evil to the "evidential" problem of evil: namely, that it is necessarily at least a necessary condition of God's permitting evil that there be *justification* for doing so. That it would be a good world God creates is evident. But that it would include evil has to be Rationalized. Virtually everyone who reflects on the matter will accept this immediately. Evil needs justification; good does not.

Now from the conjunction of (12) and (13), it follows that

- (14) There is no evil in the world.

But (14), taken together with the fourth commitment of theism from the beginning of this section, namely Evil, generates an explicit contradiction:

- (15) There is evil in the world and there is no evil in the world.

Having derived this contradiction in the way that we have, it follows that the conjunction of the three commitments of theism mentioned at the beginning of our discussion, namely, Unsurpassable Greatness, Ontological Independence, and Prior Purity, is logically inconsistent with the fourth, namely, Evil – which is what was to be proved.

## Developing the Proof: The Motives Approach

Although we have assumed, with theism, that God would create, and would create a world with finite persons, we still have not explored the theist's answer to the question *why* God would do so. The central proposal to be considered in this section will be that the answer to which theism is committed, even when irenically stated as a disjunction, with reference to more than one motive, leads inevitably to the conclusion that the world God creates must be empty of evil.

Here are the motives standardly ascribed to God. God, it may be said, creates to share the good with finite beings. Or, more specifically, God may be said to create finite beings to enter into a relationship of love with them and to facilitate their love for each other. Somewhat differently, it may be said that God's creation amounts to an overflowing or diffusion of the good that is in God (the motive here would presumably be something like a desire to expand the range of the good for its own sake), or that God creates to display the glory of God.

These answers have been quite popular in the various theological traditions of theism, and it seems that an inclusive disjunction referring to them all will be necessarily true. For either God creates for its own sake or for the sake of created things or for God, or else God is motivated in all of these ways. There are no other options. But now we have another way of seeking to prove that theists are committed to a contradiction. Let me display and defend the central points informally before fitting the latter out in the garments of a logical proof.

Suppose we say God creates to share the good. What good are we talking about? Well, obviously, the good *as God experiences it*. But that good, given the nature of God, is good-without-evil. It follows that God creates to share good-without-evil. And it certainly seems impossible that evil should appear in a world created by an unsurpassably great and thus omnipotent being to satisfy this motive! Or suppose we say the creation is an overflowing of the good that is in God. What good is in God? Well, good-without-evil, naturally. So the creation must be an overflowing of good-without-evil – with similar results. I leave it to the reader to finish the story. The ending is always the same.

I have left the motive-claim referring specifically to love for separate treatment, since it is in relation to love that the most ardently defended criticisms of this new logical problem of evil are likely to arise. Might not a God intending to facilitate for finite persons relationships of love give those persons an evil-permitting brand of libertarian free will?

Return with me, for a moment, to the therapeutic observations of the last section. There we find the notion of a "toy-world," which nicely captures the typical theistic philosopher's view of a world without evil-permitting free will. But there we also find an answer to it outlined. Take away free will as we (seem to) know it, with all the concomitant possibilities of evil, introducing more acquaintance with the purity of God, and what do you have? A flat insipid existence? Hardly! Finite persons at whatever level, in terms of capacities, could in such circumstances strain *everlastingly* to reach new levels in the experience and embodiment of God, potentially achieving new glories with every step through the pertinent

exercise of free will. As my word “strain” suggests, we have significance and dignity aplenty – in part because of innumerable opportunities for jubilant and invigorating work, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, imaginatively, and so on – in a scenario of the sort I have laid alongside the theodist’s overfamiliar picture involving free will and evil. Nor do we need a physical world as the theatre for such activities. Philosophers – even atheistic philosophers – commonly assume that if God exists and creates, the result will be a physical world. But why suppose that God would see any special value in a *physical* world? *God* is not physical, and yet most fundamentally embodies everything good. Thus, everything good that we experience physically must be even more fundamentally realizable in a non-physical form, if God exists. It does not matter if we cannot see how this is so; it *must* be so.

Now add the central point I have been emphasizing, about the prior purity of God, and it will become clear both how an evil-permitting free will apparently cannot be part of any good that God is motivated to share with finite persons in creation, and how love of the deepest value is and must be possible even so – or, at least, why theists are committed to accepting these views. Before creation, the only free will there *is* operates independently of evil, and it does so compatibly with the instantiation of unsurpassable greatness. Whatever good God may experience in connection with it, and be motivated to share, must therefore be good-without-evil. Likewise, if God is loving before creation (perhaps in the context of something like a Trinity), the love of God must be a love operating without any possibility of the evils of rejection. How, then, if God is motivated to share in creation the wonders of love as known by God, could the thought of building that possibility into finite love even arise? Notice also that, given Unsurpassable Greatness, *God’s* love for *finite creatures* must be unremitting and incapable of failure; such love, theists will say, is indeed the *paradigm or standard* of what love is. In this context, there is clearly no room to say that the love God would be motivated to facilitate among creatures could come with the possibility of rejection.

I am now ready to put all of this into the form of a logical proof. Instead of referring to each of the motives we have been talking about, I will, for simplicity’s sake, refer explicitly only to the first of them, accommodating the others with the expression “and/or relevantly similar motives.”

I begin with the proposition we have seen to be (when correctly interpreted) a necessary truth:

- (1) God’s motive in creating the world is the motive to share the good with finite beings (and/or relevantly similar motives).

From here, the proof unfolds smoothly. Our three theistic commitments, in conjunction, entail

- (2) The unsurpassable good God experiences precreation – the only good God might wish to share in creation – is good-without-evil.

And from (1) and (2), taken together, it follows that

- (3) God’s motive in creating the world is the motive to share with finite beings good-without-evil.

Now from Unsurpassable Greatness, given the maximally great ability to realize its intentions that an unsurpassably great personal being must possess, we have that

- (4) If God's motive in creating the world is the motive to share with finite beings good-without-evil, then there is no evil in the world.

And the conjunction of (3) and (4) entails that

- (5) There is no evil in the world.

But (5) in conjunction with Evil yields a contradiction:

- (6) There is evil in the world and there is no evil in the world.

Thus again we see what was to be proved: logical inconsistency between the conjunction of the first three theistic commitments, Unsurpassable Greatness, Ontological Independence, and Prior Purity, and the fourth, Evil.

## Some Final Objections

I will conclude the chapter by considering several objections to my reasoning that are, I think, representative of those likely to occur to philosophers.

Traditional theists may object in terms of the Augustinian idea that God's glory is wonderfully displayed when God performs the feats of immense *resourcefulness and ingenuity* involved in turning evil into (or toward) good. Might not God include evil in creation in order to do just that? But bringing to bear Prior Purity, we have to say that, prior to creation, God is unsurpassably and unlimitedly great *without* evil, and so whatever it is that such resourceful and ingenious acts might contribute to the Divine greatness must be expressible then too – just in other ways. Resourceful and ingenious activity is a type of thing, of which there are many possible instances or tokens. Acts of turning evil into good are some such, but surely there are others; there *must* be others – and others even more impressive – if God can be unlimitedly great without evil, and if resourceful and ingenious activity contributes to God's greatness.

"Well," says a philosopher who remains undeterred, "why shouldn't – or mightn't – God nonetheless make the choice that you are trying to put out of reach *just because it is thought interesting?*" Here, again, I think we are in danger of conflating our own perceptions with those of the Divine. I see how natural it is for *us*, none of whom has ever lived or ever will live in a purely good world, to vote for an evil-including world on grounds of (such things as) interest. But we have already agreed that there is no evil in God prior to creation and that, even so, God is the greatest possible – which surely entails the most *interesting* possible – reality. This bears thought. To select evil for inclusion in a world, God has to, as it were, *reach outside* what is most great and interesting and rich, capable of being more deeply experienced and developed by finite beings unlimitedly. How could it be other than arbitrary and perverse, and thus signally unGodlike, to do so?

A similar reply is suited to the thought of those who insist that a love that comes with radical freedom and therefore the possibility of rejection and other evil possibilities has its

own distinctive excellence – one that Divine love lacks (see Chapters 14 and 15). We must be careful here. That Divine love lacks such excellence does not imply, or even suggest, that it would be desirable for reality to include both forms. We have already seen that the type of good in God connected to the good idealized here must be *far greater* than the latter good is. As indicated in the “modeling” proof, we should be thinking about how those higher goods could continually and ever more deeply be reflected in a world. When we do think thus, we will see how God must always lack reason to introduce the evil-involving excellence we, with our limitations, are inclined to think of as desirable rather than a good-based excellence modeling God.

Perhaps it is starting to become clear just *how* prejudiced we may be in favor of familiar goods involving evil in some way. Our problem is that we cannot properly bring into a comparison with the familiar goods involving evils that impress us the more impressive goods modeled on God that might be realized instead. If we could do so, we would immediately lose our prejudice. But just seeing *that* such would be the case, given more favorable circumstances, should itself help us to lose it! I think by following such ideas far enough, advocates of the new logical problem of evil will gain invaluable help in the answering of such objections as may be raised.

This holds also for the final objection I shall consider. It stems from the thinking to which Alvin Plantinga (2004) was drawn when, recently, he returned to the logical problem of evil after a long time away. Plantinga’s tendency today is to speak even more explicitly in terms of Christian ideas, particularly the ideas of the Incarnation and the Atonement. He wants to make use of what he calls the incomparable good of God coming close to us in our humanity and taking upon himself our sin. Such a happening obviously presupposes that there is evil. Thus God can be found in possible worlds containing evil.

But Plantinga only illustrates our tendency to focus on familiar goods – in this case, goods made familiar by Christian theology. The Christian story of God’s self-humbling and self-sacrifice can, I think, be told in a way that is properly called beautiful (see Chapter 18). But whatever beauty is found here must, as we have seen, be considered alongside the idea of an instantiation of beauty that can exist without any evil at all if certain commitments of theism are to be accepted. It is the *latter* beauty that we should call “incomparable.” Presumably Plantinga himself, good Anselmian that he is, would concede that in the depths of the Divine, realized without evil, are goods too stunning for any human being to behold. These could be approached by finite persons in worlds entirely lacking evil. And we might add that in a world without evil, we could even imagine an event of Incarnation taking place, as the personal God displays the Divine love for finite persons and facilitates new ways of being bonded with them. The Felix Culpa approach therefore is too weak and too human – all too human – to perform the task required of it here.

## Conclusion

“You cannot see my face, for no one may look upon me and live,” says the God of the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 33:20, New International Version). Ironically, the danger of looking deeply into the nature of God may be of another sort. By cultivating *even more religiously sensitivity than apparently is possessed by many philosophers of religion, reflecting in detail on the purity and greatness of God*, we can find a door that opens to new versions of the logical problem of evil. Plantinga’s work in the philosophy of religion should not prevent

us from noticing them (or from looking for others, which may be waiting behind other doors). Whether the new arguments I have detailed will prove successful only time will tell. But should that turn out to be the case, then the story of God is not, as many militant atheists today would have one believe, too bad to be true, but rather too *good* to be true. Though it sounds odd to say so, perhaps only a certain (admittedly uncommon) atheistic sensibility can allow one properly to appreciate just how good it is.

But the point about religious stories being “too good to be true” can be overstated. It is only because of its own special way of filling out the more general religious proposition I have elsewhere called ultimism – the idea that there is a reality triply ultimate: metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically – that theism gets into such trouble. Take away the assumptions of Ontological Independence and Prior Purity and the game is on again – though it is likely to be a very different game.

This option, of beginning again, perhaps more humbly, with Unsurpassable Greatness alone, is not one that atheists often mention. That is because atheists are usually also metaphysical naturalists, and thus opposed to all religious ideas. I think this orientation is mired in error. In part, this is because I think we humans are still at the very beginning of what may be an extremely long process of religious adventuring on our planet.<sup>7</sup> If that is so, and if I am right about the seriousness of the problem evil presents for theism, then not only should we be prepared to let go of God, we should also gird ourselves for religious explorations and discoveries not yet dreamt in any philosophy.

## Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Justin McBrayer, Klaas Kraay, and also to an anonymous reviewer for detailed and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. Alexander Pruss’s online commentary prompted me to notice areas of insufficient clarity. I am grateful.

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# Rowe's Evidential Arguments from Evil

GRAHAM OPPY

In a series of papers over the past 35 years, William Rowe (1979, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001a, 2001c) – has claimed that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are *evidence* that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god. Moreover, and at the same time, Rowe has advanced a series of *arguments* against the existence of God that turn on considerations about the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe.

In saying that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are evidence that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god, Rowe does not mean to be claiming that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are immediately *decisive* evidence that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god. After all, there is – or, at any rate, may be – *other* evidence that bears on the hypothesis that our universe was created by an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god, and we cannot simply assume that whatever other evidence there is does not outweigh the negative evidence of the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe.

Once we recognize that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are not immediately decisive evidence that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god, a range of questions opens up. Should we suppose that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are *decisive* evidence that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god? Should we suppose that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are *strong* evidence that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god? Should we suppose that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are so much as *evidence* that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god?

I think – though I admit to some uncertainty on these matters – that Rowe's considered opinion is something like the following. On the one hand, those who believe that our

universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god may be perfectly within their doxastic rights in supposing that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are decisive evidence that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god – that is, they may perfectly reasonably maintain that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe *outweigh* all of the evidence (if, indeed, there is any) that favors the hypothesis that our universe was created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god. On the other hand, those who believe that our universe was created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god may be perfectly within their doxastic rights in supposing that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are outweighed by evidence that favors the hypothesis that our universe was created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god. However, all should agree that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are *evidence* that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god – and perhaps all should agree that the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are *strong* evidence that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god. While it is a matter for judgment – something about which sensitive, thoughtful, intelligent, well-informed people can reasonably agree to disagree – whether the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe outweigh the evidence that our universe was created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, it is not a matter for judgment – not something about which sensitive, thoughtful, intelligent, well-informed people can reasonably agree to disagree – whether the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are *evidence* that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, and it is perhaps also not a matter for judgment – not something about which sensitive, thoughtful, intelligent, well-informed people can reasonably agree to disagree – whether the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are *strong* evidence that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god.

## Two Cases

There are two cases of intense suffering that have loomed particularly large in the recent literature. So we begin with a brief exposition of these two cases.

Rowe (1979, 337) focuses on a case of animal suffering (E1):

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.

E1 is a clear case of *natural* evil – that is, a case in which no human agents bear any responsibility for the resulting suffering. Since there have been mammals on earth for at least 200,000,000 years – not to mention the further fact that there have been animals on the earth for at least 600,000,000 years – we can be sure that there has been a *very* large amount of suffering of this kind.

Rowe (1988) also focuses on a case of human suffering, involving a five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan (E2):

The girl's mother was living with her boyfriend, another man who was unemployed, her two children, and her 9-month old infant fathered by the boyfriend. On New Year's Eve all three adults were drinking at a bar near the woman's home. The boyfriend had been taking drugs and drinking heavily. He was asked to leave the bar at 8:00 p.m. After several reappearances he finally stayed away for good at about 9:30 p.m. The woman and the unemployed man remained at the bar until 2:00 a.m. at which time the woman went home and the man to a party at a neighbour's home. Perhaps out of jealousy, the boyfriend attacked the woman when she walked into the house. Her brother was there and broke up the fight by hitting the boyfriend who was passed out and slumped over a table when the brother left. Later the boyfriend attacked the woman again, and this time she knocked him unconscious. After checking the children, she went to bed. Later, the woman's 5-year old girl went downstairs to go to the bathroom. The unemployed man returned from the party at 3:45 a.m. and found the 5-year old dead. She had been raped, severely beaten over most of her body and strangled to death by the boyfriend. (Russell 1989, 123, drawing on a report from the *Detroit Free Press*, January 3, 1986)

E2 is a clear case of *moral* evil – that is, a case in which human agents bear responsibility for the resulting suffering. Since there have been anatomically modern humans on earth for about 200,000 years – not to mention the 2,500,000 years that have elapsed since our genus *homo sapiens* first appeared – we can also be sure that there has been a *very* large amount of suffering of this kind.

## Rowe's Arguments

Over his career, Rowe has advanced various different arguments from intense suffering against the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being. While there are obvious affinities between these arguments, there are also some significant points of difference as well.

Rowe (1979) discusses the following argument:

- (1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (3) (Therefore) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.

In justification of the first premise of this argument, there are two significant claims that Rowe makes. First, in connection with the case of the fawn injured in the forest fire, Rowe says:

It must be acknowledged that the case of the fawn's apparently pointless suffering does not prove that (1) is true. . . . Perhaps, for all we know, there is some familiar good outweighing the fawn's suffering to which that suffering is connected in a way we do not see. Furthermore, there may well be unfamiliar goods, goods we haven't dreamed of, to which the fawn's suffering is inextricably linked. (Rowe 1979, 337)

But, second, he goes on to add:

In the light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of this suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an extraordinarily absurd idea, quite beyond our belief. (Rowe 1979, 338)

These points together suggest an implicit argument for the first premise of the central argument of Rowe (1979), along the following lines:

- (1) There exist instances of intense suffering – E1, E2 – with respect to which, despite long and concerted searching, we have been unable to identify either greater goods that would have been lost had an omnipotent, omniscient being prevented them, or evils equally bad or worse that would have been permitted had an omnipotent, omniscient being prevented them.
- (2) We have examined many more instances of intense suffering of these kinds, with a view to determining whether an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented them without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse, and, in these other cases, too, we have been unable to identify either greater goods that would have been lost had an omnipotent, omniscient being prevented these instances of intense suffering, or evils equally bad or worse that would have been permitted had an omnipotent, omniscient being prevented these instances of intense suffering.
- (3) We have excellent reason to suppose that the instances of intense suffering of these kinds that we have examined are representative of vastly more numerous instances of intense suffering of these kinds that we have not examined in this way.
- (4) (Therefore) (Probably) There exist instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Rowe (1988) discusses the following argument:

- (1) No good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting particular cases of horrendous suffering (E1 and E2).
- (2) (Therefore) (Probably) No good at all justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting particular cases of horrendous suffering (E1 and E2).
- (3) (Therefore) (Probably) There is no omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.

It is worth noting that this argument makes explicit the previously implicit argument for the existence of evils for which we are unable to identify justifying goods, but that it focuses exclusively on the particular cases (E1 and E2). This seems to me to be a significant difference between the argument of Rowe (1979) and the argument of Rowe (1988).

Rowe (1996) discusses the following argument:

- (1) The probability that God exists, conditional on the claim that no good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting particular cases of horrendous suffering (E1 and E2), is less than the prior probability that God exists.
- (2) The prior probability that God exists is 0.5.

- (3) (Therefore) The claim that no good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting particular cases of horrendous suffering (E1 and E2) lowers the probability that God exists to something less than 0.5.

The first premise of this argument is an instance of a theorem of the probability calculus. Consequently, there is no serious question but that the first premise of this argument is true, and there is also no serious question but that this argument is valid.

## Initial Comments on Rowe's Arguments

As many commentators have observed, there are serious difficulties that confront the argument of Rowe (1996). In particular, almost no one is happy with the second premise: contrary to Rowe's explicit avowal, a prior probability of 0.5 is not a good representation for prior lack of opinion on a matter. (Rather, a prior probability of 0.5 would indicate a prior opinion that there is equal evidential support for both sides of the matter in question.) Moreover, as Otte (2002) suggests, Rowe's argument is an argument from *partitioned* evidence (though it is not, as Plantinga (1998) complains, an argument from *degenerate* evidence). Given these difficulties, I think that we do better to focus on the earlier arguments of Rowe (1988) and – in particular – Rowe (1979).

While some have objected to the second premise in the argument of Rowe (1979) – see, for example, Hasker (1992) and van Inwagen (1988, 1991, 2000) (and Chapter 27 in this volume) – most critical attention has focused on the first premise, and, in particular, on Rowe's attempts to justify the first premise.

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of responses that have attracted some support. On the one hand, *theodiscists* – for example, Hick (1966), Hasker (1988), Swinburne (1998), Adams (1999), and Stump (2010) – have argued that we are able to identify the greater goods that justify the intense suffering to be found in our universe: freedom, natural law, moral responsibility, moral development, eternal divine felicity, and the like (see Chapter 12). On the other hand, *skeptical theists* – for example, Wykstra (1984, 1996), van Inwagen (1988, 1991, 2000), Alston (1991, 1996), Howard-Snyder (1996b, 2009), and Bergmann (2001, 2009) – have argued that we should not expect to be able to discern the reasons why an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god permits the range of intense suffering that occurs in our universe: our inability to identify possible reasons is simply no evidence that there are no such reasons (see Chapter 29).

It is important to be clear about the magnitude of the task faced by theodiscists. Consider, again, the case E2. If there is to be a justification for the suffering of the five-year-old girl, that justification surely must be in terms of goods *for her*. Moreover, it cannot be that the goods accrued to her *prior to* her rape, beating, and death: the justification for permitting her rape, beating, and death must be goods that flow to her as a *consequence* of her being raped, beaten, and murdered. For myself, I find it obscene and unspeakable to suppose that nominated great goods flow to her *while* she is being raped, beaten, and murdered. And I find it no less obscene and unspeakable to suppose that her rape, beating, and murder were *necessary* for her to acquire nominated greater goods after she was dead – for example, eternal divine felicity.

I should acknowledge that it is controversial to claim that justifications for horrendous evils need to be “patient-centered.” While some theists – for example, Adams (1999) and

Stump (2010), clearly accept that any justification for the suffering of the five-year-old girl must be in terms of goods for her, other theists – for example, Alston (1991), Swinburne (1998), Jordan (2004), and Mawson (2005) – (may) deny that this is so. I think that Dostoyevsky (2004) asks exactly the right question: “Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it is essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance – and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth.”

## Framework and Assessment

Before we turn to a more careful consideration of some main issues that arise, I need to make some preliminary observations about arguments, and about the bearing of evidence on theory choice.

In my view, when we come to assess arguments, we need to think about the intended targets of those arguments, and about what the intended targets of those arguments might reasonably believe. When we come to assess the success of an argument, we have to try to see the argument from the standpoint of the intended targets: if we believed what they believe, should we find the argument persuasive?

Given this view about the assessment of arguments, it is doubtless unsurprising that I hold that all extant arguments for and against the existence of God are unsuccessful. In particular, given my view about the assessment of arguments, it is doubtless unsurprising that I hold that Rowe’s evidential arguments are unsuccessful. I see no reason why theists are required to accept the first premise of Rowe’s argument; I see no reason why we should not say that this is just another of the many claims about which reasonable people can reasonably disagree. True, as I have already indicated, I am inclined to disbelieve the claims made by theodacists and skeptical theists; but it hardly follows that I am required to suppose that theodacists and skeptical theists are irrational – or otherwise cognitively deficient – in denying the first premise of Rowe’s argument. And, if I allow that, if I believed what they believe I ought not to be persuaded by Rowe’s argument, then it surely follows that I am obliged to conclude that Rowe’s argument is unsuccessful.

But, of course, that is not the end of the story. For it is one question whether Rowe’s arguments are successful; it is quite another question whether the kinds and amounts of suffering to be found in our universe are evidence that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god. And that brings us to questions about the assessment of evidence.

I think that we should proceed by imagining a debate between proponents of two different worldviews (see Chapter 5). One of these worldviews is Theism, which says, among other things, that our universe was created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god. The other worldview is Naturalism, which says, among other things, that there are none but natural causes involving none but natural entities. Of course, Naturalism entails Atheism: in particular, Naturalism entails that our universe was not created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, and that there is no omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god.

We should focus, in particular, on the theoretical virtues of the worldviews in question. Is either internally inconsistent? Does one have fewer theoretical commitments than the

other? Does one have explanatory virtues that are lacked by the other? Does one comport better than the other with independently established theories?

Suppose that we agree – at least for the sake of argument – that both theories are internally consistent. It then seems natural to think that, before we come to consider relevant evidence, Naturalism has an advantage in terms of theoretical commitments. For, while Naturalists are committed only to natural causes involving natural entities, Theists are committed, *in addition*, to supernatural causes involving supernatural entities. Hence, it also seems natural to think that, if Theism is to be overall more theoretically virtuous than Naturalism, this will have to be because there are local cases in which Theism has an explanatory advantage over Naturalism – and, indeed, that there are sufficiently many, or sufficiently weighty, cases in which Theism has an explanatory advantage over Naturalism to tip the scales in favor of Theism.

How do things stand when it comes to the distribution of intense suffering in our universe? Is this a case in which Theism has an explanatory advantage over Naturalism, or a case in which Naturalism has an explanatory advantage over Theism, or a case in which neither view has an explanatory advantage over the other? On the one hand, there seems to be nothing particularly surprising about the distribution of intense suffering in our universe given the tenets of Naturalism: there is no apparent need to introduce further postulates, or principles, in order to square Naturalism with the distribution of intense suffering in our universe. On the other hand, it seems that there is something at least *prima facie* surprising about the distribution of intense suffering in our universe given the tenets of Theism: there is, at the very least, an apparently widely felt need to introduce new postulates, or principles, in order to square Theism with the distribution of intense suffering in our universe.

However, if squaring Theism with the distribution of intense suffering in our universe is taken to require the postulation of an afterlife in which there is compensation for that intense suffering, or the postulation of fallen angels who inflict that intense suffering upon us, or the postulation of goods beyond our ken that provide justification for permission of the distribution of intense suffering in our universe by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, or the like, then, the distribution of intense suffering in our universe does turn out to favor Naturalism over Theism, since this increase in the theoretical commitments of Theism merely *adds* to the initial advantage that Naturalism has over Theism on account of theoretical commitments.

Of course, to say that Naturalism has this *local* advantage over Theism when it comes to the distribution of intense suffering in our universe is *not* to say that Naturalism trumps Theism (let alone that Naturalism trumps Theism simply because of the distribution of intense suffering in our universe). After all, we have said nothing yet about whether there is independent justification for the postulates in question. It might be that there are *other* data that are better explained by Theism than by Naturalism in virtue of Theism's postulation of an afterlife, or fallen angels, or goods beyond our ken that provide justification for permission of the distribution of intense suffering by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, or the like. Or it might be that there are other well-established theories that comport better with Theism than with Naturalism in virtue of Theism's postulation of an afterlife, or fallen angels, or goods beyond our ken that provide justification for permission of that distribution of intense suffering by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, or the like. Or it might just be that, even though there is net loss of theoretical virtue involved in the postulation of an afterlife, or fallen angels, or goods



beyond our ken that provide justification for permission of the distribution of intense suffering by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, or the like, this net loss in theoretical virtue is offset by net gains elsewhere (in connection with considerations about the origins of causal reality, or the fine-tuning of causal reality, or the presence of consciousness and reason in causal reality, or the insignificance of human beings on any cosmic scale, or the apparent objectivity of various normative domains, or the range and distribution of religious belief, or the nature and existence of diverse canonical religious texts, or the full range of attestations to the occurrence of “anomalous” phenomena, or the quantities and distribution of various kinds of great goods in our universe, and so forth). However, unless there is independent reason for Naturalism to posit an afterlife, or fallen angels, or goods beyond our ken that provide justification for permission of the distribution of intense suffering by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, or the like, it seems undeniable that Naturalism *does* have a local advantage over Theism when it comes to the distribution of intense suffering in our universe.

Perhaps it might be objected that, if Naturalism has a local advantage over Theism when it comes to the distribution of intense suffering in our universe, then it should be possible to encode that local superiority in a successful argument. And perhaps it might be added that, in fact, Rowe’s argument does exactly that. However, I do not think that this is so. True enough, Rowe consistently frames his arguments in a context in which other considerations are meant to be ignored: he never suggests that considerations about intense suffering are decisive evidence against the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god. Nonetheless, Rowe’s arguments are not framed as comparisons of theism with alternative worldviews; rather, they aim for a noncomparative conclusion about the absolute epistemic or doxastic value of theism relative to the particular evidence that is the distribution of intense suffering in our universe. But I do not think that any argument of this kind can succeed. As I have already noted, I think that Rowe’s (1979) formulation of his first premise invites the response that, while Naturalists can reasonably suppose that the first premise is true, Theists can reasonably suppose that the first premise is false. Certainly, for all that is given in the argument, there is no reason why Theists cannot reasonably deny the first premise of Rowe’s (1979) argument.)

Perhaps some will think that the claim to skepticism that I have just made sounds similar to claims made by Paul Draper (1989, 2004) (see Chapter 5). However, the framework for assessment of theories (or worldviews) that I have sketched is rather different from the framework that Draper adopts. In particular, I have not suggested that we should proceed by trying to compare the probabilities that theories have relative to some evidence: I do not believe that we currently have any *effective* method for comparing the probabilities that theories have relative to evidence that overcomes the difficulties posed by reasonable disagreement about the prior probabilities of theories. In the absence of *effective* methods for turning judgments about theoretical virtues into probabilistic judgments, it seems to me that the only way forward is to make direct comparisons between theories, on given evidence, in terms of the various theoretical virtues. But if all of that is right, then, (a) Rowe’s formulation is defective because it is not couched in terms of comparisons between competing theories; (b) Draper’s formulation fails because it does not focus on the right kinds of comparisons between competing theories; and (c) both approaches are defective because they try to produce standard-form arguments in circumstances in which the production of standard-form arguments is simply surplus to requirements.



## A Central Issue

Might there be independent reason for Naturalism to posit goods beyond our ken that would provide justification for permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the distribution of intense suffering in our world (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god)? In particular, might there be independent reason for Naturalism to posit goods beyond our ken that would provide justification for permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god)?

That seems implausible. After all, Naturalists have no more reason to suppose that there are goods beyond our ken that would provide justification for permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god) than they have to suppose that there are evils beyond our ken that would provide justification for prevention, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of attendance at Christian churches by five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god). Which is just to say that Naturalists have *no reason at all* to suppose that there are goods beyond our ken that would provide justification for permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god). But, absent good reason to postulate such goods, on straightforward grounds of theoretical virtue, Naturalists should not do so.

However, even if it is accepted that Naturalism ought have no truck with goods beyond our ken that would provide justification for permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god), it might nonetheless be supposed that those who are inclined to embrace Naturalism ought to exercise caution when it comes to the question of goods beyond our ken that would provide justification for permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god). After all, it is one thing to embrace Naturalism; it is quite another to be absolutely certain that Naturalism is true.

I understand Skeptical Theism to be a position that endorses the view that even those who embrace Naturalism ought to be unsure whether there are goods beyond our ken that would provide justification for permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god) (see Chapter 29). Thus understood, Skeptical Theism might be explained in terms of commitment to theses such as the following (see, e.g., Howard-Snyder 2009, 18, and, for comparison, Bergmann 2001, 2009; and for somewhat different ways of understanding Skeptical Theism, see, e.g., Wykstra 1984, 1996, and Alston 1991, 1996):

- (1) We should be in doubt about whether the goods we can know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are with respect to being apt for justifying

permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god).

- (2) We should be in doubt about whether each good we can know of is such that the necessary conditions of its realization we can know of are all there are with respect to being apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god).

Why might it be thought that even those who embrace Naturalism ought to be prepared to endorse these theses? At least the following considerations have been advanced in the literature:

*Progress:* Given the patchy evidence that we have concerning the occasional discovery of new intrinsic goods over the past few millennia, it would not be surprising if there remain goods that we have not yet discovered (Howard-Snyder 1999, 111).

*Complexity:* Quite generally, increasing complexity correlates with increased difficulty in understanding. Given that intense suffering is so awful, it is hardly surprising that outweighing goods would have to be so complex that they would evade our understanding (Howard-Snyder 1999, 111).

*Fallibility:* If we are to suppose that the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are with respect to being apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god), then we need to suppose that we possess the concepts needed to comprehend and understand every member of the total population of goods apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god). But surely, it would be an extraordinary stroke of good epistemic luck if our evolutionary history to this point left us with every concept needed to comprehend and understand every member of the total population of goods apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god) (Howard-Snyder 2009, 26f.).

*Analogies:* To reject the theses set out earlier is to “take insights attainable by finite, fallible human beings as an adequate indication of what is available in the way of reasons to an omniscient, omnipotent being” (Alston 1996, 316). Rejection of the theses “involves trying to determine whether there is a so-and-so in a territory the extent and composition of which is largely unknown to us” (Alston 1996, 319). We stand to God in something like the way that young human children stand to their human parents, only more so: but of course we all understand that young human children often do not have what it takes to understand some of the goods of human existence.

These considerations seem to me to be far from compelling.

It seems reasonable to grant that there is evidence of occasional discoveries concerning intrinsic goods over the past few millennia, and it also seems reasonable to grant that this is some reason to suppose that we shall make further discoveries concerning intrinsic goods

in the coming millennia (so long as humanity survives long enough to make such discoveries). But, in the nature of the case, intrinsic goods that we shall discover are not goods beyond our ken (i.e., goods that are beyond our powers of comprehension): there is no reason to suppose that our having occasionally made discoveries concerning intrinsic goods is evidence that there are considerations concerning intrinsic goods that we lack the capacity to recognize. Moreover – and perhaps more importantly – there is nothing in the new intrinsic goods that have been discovered in the past few millennia that suggests reasons to suppose that there are goods apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god). Yes, we have come to recognize that slavery is intrinsically wrong, and that homosexuality is not intrinsically wrong, and so forth: but where, in any of this, is there reason to suppose that there are goods – let alone goods beyond our ken – apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god)?

It seems reasonable to grant that there is some correlation between increasing complexity and increasing difficulty in understanding. But it is hard to discern any good reason for thinking that, because intense suffering is so awful, outweighing goods would need to be very complicated (and, indeed, so complicated that they would evade our understanding). After all, the simple fact is that we have no trouble at all recognizing intense suffering and identifying that *it* is awful. But, given that intense suffering need not be especially complicated – and certainly need not be so complicated as to evade our understanding – why on earth should we suppose that outweighing goodness must be so fiendishly complicated as to evade our understanding? Why should not we rather suppose that outweighing goodness would simply be correspondingly *intense* goodness? (Cf. Tooley 1991 for related thoughts.)

I think that nothing could justify rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls; and I think that nothing could justify inaction in the face of rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls other than inability (on grounds of lack of power, or knowledge, or the like). Rather than concede that it would be an extraordinary stroke of good epistemic luck if our evolutionary history to this point left us with every concept needed to comprehend and understand *every* member of the total population of goods apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god), I say that the *emptiness* of the population of goods apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god) explains why epistemic luck is simply beside the point. Our evolutionary history to this point has left us with *all* of the concepts needed to understand *all* of the members of the total population of goods apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god), *because* that population has no members, and so no concepts at all are required for the understanding in question. Putting the point in a way that does not beg any questions: *whether* it would be an extraordinary stroke of good epistemic luck if our evolutionary history to this point left us with every concept needed to comprehend and understand every member of the total population of goods apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and

perfectly good god) *depends upon* whether there are any goods apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god). (Again, cf. Tooley 1991 and Rowe 1996 for related arguments.)

It seems to me to be quite clear that rejection of the Skeptical Theist theses does *not* require taking insights attainable by finite, fallible human beings as an adequate indication of what is available in the way of reasons to an omniscient, omnipotent being. True enough, one of the theories that we are deciding between is committed to the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good god. And, on that theory, it will be supposed that there are goods apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls. But the decision between the theories is a matter for finite, fallible, human beings: we can only weigh the considerations that are available to us. On the one hand, Theism is committed to an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god who acts for reasons that may be inaccessible to us; on the other hand, Naturalism is committed neither to an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, nor to actions of that god on the basis of reasons that may be inaccessible to us. If Naturalists are right, then we do better to reject both god and the (possibly) inaccessible reasons upon which god acts. (Considerations about “a territory the extent and composition of which is largely unknown to us” and the parent/child analogy were, I think, adequately addressed in the previous response to the “Fallibility” objection.)

Aside from the weakness of the arguments that have been offered in defense of the claim that even those who embrace Naturalism ought to be prepared to endorse these theses, there are also fairly strong considerations that militate against that claim. As I noted earlier, if there were to be a justification for the permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god), that justification would surely have to be in terms of goods *for* the five-year-old girls in question. But it cannot be that the goods are accrued by the girls prior to their rape, torture, and murder: the justification for permitting the rape, beating, and murder must be in terms of goods the flow to the girls as a result of their being raped, beaten, and murdered. But it is obscene and unspeakable to suppose that great goods flow to the girls while they are being raped, beaten, and murdered; and it is impossible for great goods to flow to the girls after they cease to exist (as a result of having been raped, beaten, and then murdered). But, if there is no point at which the girls can accrue goods as a result of their having been raped, beaten, and murdered, then there is no room for doubt about whether the goods we can know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are with respect to being apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god), or about whether each good we can know of is such that the necessary conditions of its realization we can know of are all there are with respect to being apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god).

I conclude that not only is there no reason for Naturalism to posit goods beyond our ken that would provide justification for permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the distribution of intense suffering in our world (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god), there is also no reason for Naturalists to

accept the kinds of theses to which Skeptical Theists are typically committed: Naturalists should not be in doubt about whether the goods we can know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are with respect to being apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good god), and Naturalists should not be in doubt about whether each good we can know of is such that the necessary conditions of its realization we can know of are all there are with respect to being apt for justifying permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god).

### A Further Consideration

Naturalists might take the following argument to encode another reason for rejecting the kinds of theses to which Skeptical Theists are typically committed:

- (1) If we should be unsure whether there are great goods that flow to five-year-old girls who are raped, tortured and murdered, as a result of their being raped, tortured and murdered, then we should be unsure whether we ought to intervene to prevent the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls even when we are in a position to do so at no cost to ourselves.
- (2) We should not be unsure whether we ought to intervene to prevent the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls even when we are in a position to do so at no cost to ourselves.
- (3) (Therefore) We should not be unsure whether there are great goods that flow to five-year-old girls who are raped, tortured, and murdered, as a result of their being raped, tortured, and murdered.

Against this argument, Howard-Snyder (2009) objects that there is no theory of the right-making and wrong-making properties of actions that can vindicate both of its premises. I disagree.

Think of decision situations in the following terms: there are a bunch of actions  $A_i$  between which we must decide, a bunch of possible states of the world  $S_j$  (to which we ascribe probabilities  $p_j$ ), and a bunch of values  $V_{ij}$  (representing the values that we attach to our performing the actions  $A_i$  given the states  $S_j$ ). We suppose that our decision rule tells us to choose the action  $A_i$  that maximizes the value of  $\sum_j p_j V_{ij}$ . Note that we make *no* assumptions about the nature of the values: they can be deontic, or consequentialist, or virtue-theoretic, or whatever else floats your boat.

In the case in which we are interested, we must choose between intervening to prevent the rape, torture, and murder of a five-year-old girl (at no cost to ourselves), and not intervening to prevent the rape, torture, and murder of a five-year-old girl (at no cost to ourselves). We suppose that we assign very large disvalue to all of the act/state pairs in which we do not intervene to prevent the rape, torture, and murder of the girl (at no cost to ourselves); and that we do not assign very large disvalue to any of the act/state pairs in which we do intervene to prevent the rape, torture, and murder of the girl (at no cost to ourselves).

On the one hand, given that there are no other relevant considerations, it is clear that our calculation will tell us to intervene, and that there is no doubt that our calculation will tell us to intervene. It is not merely the case that we ought to intervene to prevent the rape, torture, and murder of the five-year-old girl; we should not be unsure whether we ought to intervene to prevent the rape, torture, and murder of the five-year-old girl. So the second premise of the argument is clearly vindicated.

On the other hand, if we are unsure whether outweighing goods will accrue to the girl as a result of her being raped, tortured, and murdered, then we cannot now reach the same conclusion as before: we must now be unsure whether we should assign very large disvalue to all of the act/state pairs in which we do not intervene to prevent the rape, torture, and murder of the girl (at no cost to ourselves). Which is just to say that the first premise of the argument is clearly vindicated. (Consider this: “It is hard to say whether or not created persons must be permitted to undergo horrific suffering in order to enter into the deepest union with God. . . . For all we can tell, there are aspects of God’s nature that we do not know of in virtue of which a created person can enter into the deepest union with God only if she is permitted to undergo horrific suffering” (Howard-Snyder 2009, 27). Well, if I am not sure whether this five-year-old girl’s deepest union with God depends upon her being raped, tortured, and murdered here and now, how can I be sure that I ought to intervene to prevent her rape, torture, and murder here and now? Heaven forefend that I should stand between her and deepest union with God!)

Why does Howard-Snyder think that there is something wrong with this line of thought? I think because he supposes that the weight of “unforeseeable values” of our actions prevents us from ever performing the kinds of calculations that I have suggested are involved whenever we make decisions under uncertainty.

I think that “unforeseeable values” are handled in decision theory in something like the following way: the values  $V_{ij}$  are really of the form  $R_{ij} \pm C$ , where  $\pm C$  is a constant that takes the same value for each of the  $R_{ij}$ . The point is that the “unforeseeable” value that attaches to each act/state pair has to be the same: “foreseeable” value is all built into the  $R_{ij}$ . But, of course, once this point is noted, we see that we can simply write  $R_{ij} \pm C$  as  $V_{ij}$ : for the  $\pm C$  will simply have no effect on the final calculation, and so can be “renormalized” away.

Against this kind of suggestion, Howard-Snyder says: “Given that intervention and non-intervention have massive and inscrutable causal ramifications, and given that the unforeseeable consequences swamp the foreseeable ones, we have just as much reason to believe that the total consequences of non-intervention outweigh the total consequences of intervention as we have to believe that the total consequences of intervention outweigh the total consequences of non-intervention. Thus, we should be in doubt about whether we should intervene” (Howard-Snyder 2009, 38). But – as we saw earlier – it is simply not true that the unforeseeable consequences “swamp” the foreseeable consequences. Of course, something like the following is true: if we could decompose the “foreseen value” into signed values  $f_i$  that attach to foreseen consequences, and we could decompose the “unforeseen value” into signed values  $u_i$  that attach to unforeseen consequences, then it would be that  $\sum_i |f_i| < \sum_i |u_i|$ . But terms such as these play no role – and should play no role – in our decision theory: that  $\sum_i |f_i| < \sum_i |u_i|$  has no implications for the outline of decision theory that I gave earlier.

I conclude that the argument in question does encode further reason for Naturalists to reject the kinds of theses to which Skeptical Theists are typically committed. However, I hasten to add, I do not suppose that *this* argument encodes reasons for *Theists* to reject the



kinds of theses to which Skeptical Theists are typically committed. As Howard-Snyder (2009, 43f.) observes, Theists may well suppose, for example, that God has instructed humankind to prevent suffering in general, and that God permits a lot of it precisely because he intends for us to try to prevent it. (So, somehow, I would not stand between the five-year-old girl and her deepest union with God were I to intervene to prevent her rape, torture, and murder.) Nonetheless, I must observe that, in the context of the choice between Naturalism and Theism that I have taken to be the proper framework for evaluation of the evidential import of intense suffering, the claim that God has instructed humankind to prevent suffering in general, and so on *further* increases the advantage that Naturalism has over Theism in respect of theoretical commitments. Unless there is *other* evidence that supports the claim that God has instructed humankind to prevent suffering in general, and so on, it does turn out to be the case that considerations about intense suffering favor Naturalism over Theism and, more generally, unless Theism *otherwise* possesses theoretical virtues that outweigh the theoretical losses involved in accommodating data concerning intense suffering, it does turn out to be the case that considerations about intense suffering decisively favor Naturalism over Theism.

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to Dan Howard-Snyder and Justin McBrayer for the invitation to contribute to this volume, and for their enthusiastic and sage editorial advice and assistance. Thanks, too, to Klaas Kraay and an anonymous referee for many helpful suggestions that have led to improvements of this chapter. Of course, none of the above should be blamed for any of the numerous faults that remain.

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# Explanation and the Problem of Evil

PAUL DRAPER AND TRENT DOUGHERTY

## Humean Arguments from Evil (by Paul Draper)

### *What is a Humean argument from evil?*

Evidential arguments from evil against Theism try to show that Theism fits certain facts about evil poorly (at least compared with alternatives), not in the sense of being demonstrably inconsistent with those facts – that is what logical arguments from evil try to show (see Chapters 2 and 3) – but in some other sense. For example, a central premise of what are sometimes called “Humean” arguments from evil is that some sufficiently credible alternative “hypothesis” to Theism, taken together with background information, explains or predicts or in some other sense fits what David Hume (1993, 113) called “the strange mixture of good and ill which appears in life” much better than Theism does. Such arguments have five distinctive features that arguably make them superior to many other evidential arguments from evil.

First, they employ an evidence statement about both good and evil instead of one that focuses on evil alone. This is not a trivial feature of these arguments. The significance of showing that what we know about evils like pain or vice counts against Theism depends in part on whether what we know about corresponding goods like pleasure or virtue counts just as much in favor of Theism. By including both good and evil in the evidence statement of an argument from evil, this issue is addressed preemptively.

Second, Humean arguments appeal directly to known facts about evil (e.g., to facts about the existence, kinds, amounts, or distribution of evil) instead of to facts about our inability to explain why a God might allow such facts to obtain. So Humean arguments are arguments *from evil* in the strict sense, while arguments like Michael Martin’s (1978) and William L. Rowe’s (1988, 1996) can, I suppose, legitimately be called arguments from evil since they employ evidence statements that are, broadly speaking, about evil, but they are more precisely described as arguments from the failure of theodicy (broadly understood

as theistic explanations of evil).<sup>1</sup> Of course, theodicies are relevant to Humean arguments from evil, since a very successful comprehensive theodicy could potentially refute any argument from evil, but it is one thing to ask whether certain evils are evidence against Theism and quite another to ask whether, given that those evils exist, the inability of theists to adequately explain their existence is (further) evidence against Theism. Crucially, as will be explained later, the evils in the world might still be very surprising given Theism even if our inability to explain why God might produce or allow them is exactly what one would expect on the assumption that both God and those evils exist.

This second feature is closely related to a third, namely, that Humean arguments do not depend, even implicitly, on noseem inferences. Stephen J. Wykstra (1984) famously accuses Rowe of arguing that, when it comes to potentially God-justifying reasons for certain evils, we “no-see-them,” from which it follows (according to Rowe) either that there does not appear to be any or, more simply, that there probably are not any<sup>2</sup> (see Chapter 4). Again, the defense of a Humean argument from evil may involve showing that certain alleged God-justifying reasons are not genuine, but Humean arguments do not infer *directly* from any such noseem claim that genuine God-justifying reasons probably do not exist. How, then, do Humeans arrive at the conclusion that God probably does not exist? The fourth and fifth distinctive features of Humean arguments answer that question.

The fourth concerns the role of competing hypotheses in the argument. A Humean argument compares Theism with at least one alternative hypothesis (like atheism or Charles Darwin’s “no design hypothesis”<sup>3</sup> or David Hume’s “indifference hypothesis”). In Hume’s own argument, three alternatives are mentioned, but the one that is claimed to be superior to the theistic hypothesis is that the cause or causes of the universe are neither benevolent nor malevolent. This fourth feature is a consequence of a fifth. Humean arguments are, broadly speaking, abductive. They do not involve an inference to the best explanation, but they do involve an inference to the probable falsity of an inferior explanation. Specifically, they attempt to show that some *serious* alternative hypothesis to Theism (i.e., some alternative hypothesis that is at least as simple or initially plausible as Theism) explains or “predicts” or in some other way “fits” certain facts about good and evil much better than Theism does. From this and one or more additional premises that address the issue of potentially offsetting evidence in favor of Theism, the conclusion is drawn that the alternative hypothesis is more probable than Theism; and while that does not imply that the alternative hypothesis is probably true, it does imply that Theism is probably false.

1 Martin’s argument refers to the statement, which he calls “R,” that either God has a sufficient reason for allowing the existence of evil in great abundance or evil in great abundance is logically necessary. A key premise is that repeated attempts to establish R (and in particular its first disjunct) have failed. Rowe has two arguments, the first of which he reformulated several times. In both his final formulation of the first argument (Rowe 1988) and his second argument (Rowe 1996), Rowe employs the premise, which he calls “P,” that no good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting certain horrific evils.

2 Rowe’s second argument from evil does not employ a noseem inference, but this argument was conclusively refuted by Richard Otte (2002), suggesting just how difficult it is to formulate a plausible argument from the failure of theodicy (which is a “noseem” premise) that is not also a noseem argument (i.e., an argument from evil that depends on a noseem inference).

3 According to Darwin’s no design hypothesis, living things and their adaptations are not intentionally designed (although the laws of nature might be). In his autobiography (Darwin 1958), Darwin (arguably) uses this hypothesis and his theory of natural selection to construct an abductive argument from evil against Theism. For more on this, see Draper (2012).

### *An example of a Humean argument*

Here is an example of a Humean argument from evil:

- (1) Naturalism is much simpler than Theism.
  - (2) Naturalism has much more predictive power than Theism does with respect to “the data of good and evil” – that is, with respect to what we *know* about the distribution and relative quantities of (physical) pain and pleasure, flourishing and floundering, virtue and vice, and triumph and tragedy.
  - (3) Any epistemic advantages that Theism has over Naturalism (i.e., any factors that raise the ratio of the probability of Theism to the probability of Naturalism) do not, even when combined, suffice to offset the epistemic advantages that Naturalism has over Theism if premises 1 and 2 are true.
- So, (4) Theism is probably false.

I lack sufficient space to provide anything remotely like a serious defense of this argument. I will, however, try to say enough about the first two premises to establish their plausibility, and then briefly discuss a variety of theistic responses to this argument, including two challenges to the third premise, one based on natural theology and one based on Reformed epistemology. As for the inference, the argument, interpreted charitably, appears to be (informally) valid, and this is supported by the fact that a mathematical model of the argument can be constructed that is obviously valid.<sup>4</sup>

### *Definitions*

Two key terms in the argument are “Naturalism” and “Theism.” Philosophers use the term “Naturalism” to refer to a wide variety of different theses and nontheses. I use the term to refer to a particular metaphysical theory, contrasting it with another metaphysical theory that I call “Supernaturalism.” To understand my nonstandard stipulative definitions of these two terms, it is important to notice that concrete reality at least appears to include both a mental world of conscious experiences like thoughts, feelings, imaginings, and sensations – and a physical world of rocks, chemical reactions, galaxies, and neurons. Throughout history, most philosophers have held the position either that one of these two parts of concrete reality explains why the other part exists or that only one part really exists. There are two versions of this position, one of which I call Naturalism and the other of which I call Supernaturalism.

4 Here is the model. Let “ $P(x)$ ” stand for the probability that the proposition  $x$  is true solely on tautological evidence. Let “ $P(x/y)$ ” stand for the probability that  $x$  is true relative solely to evidence  $y$ . Finally, let, “N,” “T,” “D,” and “b” stand for Naturalism, Theism, the data of good and evil, and the relevant background evidence, respectively. Assuming that Naturalism and Theism are inconsistent in the broadly logical sense and, more controversially, that the axioms of the probability calculus are necessarily true, the following argument is valid. (1)  $P(N) \gg P(T)$ . (2)  $P(D/N\&b) \gg P(D/T\&b)$ . (3) If 1 and 2 are true, then the product of the ratio of  $P(N)$  to  $P(T)$  and the ratio of  $P(D/N\&b)$  to  $P(D/T\&b)$  is greater than the ratio of  $P(b/T)$  to  $P(b/N)$ . Therefore, (4)  $P(T/D\&b) < (1/2)$ . Of course, from the fact that this argument is valid, it does not follow that the argument it models is also valid. Like all models, this one involves certain idealizations. But it does suffice, I think, to shift the burden of proof.

Naturalists claim that either the mental world does not exist or it does exist but is asymmetrically dependent on the existence of the physical world (i.e., were it not for a physical world, there would be no mental world, while there would still be a physical world even if there were no mental world). Most naturalists are what I call “scientific naturalists.” They add to Naturalism the claim that the explanation of why any mental entities exist is a scientific one (and in particular a covering law explanation). Of course, scientific naturalists do not know exactly what that explanation is. They do not know what the laws are that explain why matter, when arranged in a certain way (e.g., in the form of a functioning nervous system of the right sort), brings mind into existence. But scientific naturalists must hold that there are such laws.

Supernaturalists claim that either the physical world does not exist or it does exist but is asymmetrically dependent on the existence of the mental world. Most supernaturalists are what I call “personal supernaturalists.” They add to Supernaturalism the claim that the mental entity or entities that explain why there is a physical world are persons and that the explanation in question is teleological or purposive. Of course, personal supernaturalists need not claim to know what purposes were being pursued when the physical world was created, but they must hold that there are such purposes.

Obviously Naturalism and Supernaturalism cannot both be true. It is at least conceivable, however, that both are false. For example, some forms of panpsychism imply that neither the mental world nor the physical world depends for its existence on the other, while other forms imply that each depends on the other. Another possibility is that something that transcends all but our most general categories and so has neither physical nor mental properties is the immediate cause of both physical and mental reality. Let us group together all of these nonnaturalist, nonsupernaturalist alternatives under the single banner of “Otherism.” Given these definitions, exactly one of Naturalism, Supernaturalism, and Otherism must be true.

Finally, Theism as typically understood by contemporary analytic philosophers of religion is a form of Supernaturalism and in particular a form of personal Supernaturalism. It identifies the reality responsible for the existence of physical reality with a personal God – in other words, with a unique being that either is or has a mind and that is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent (that is, perfectly good).<sup>5</sup>

### *Simplicity*

With these definitions in hand, I am now ready to sketch a defense of the first premise of the argument, which says that Naturalism is much simpler than Theism. Many scientists and philosophers of science believe, and I assume in this chapter, that simplicity is an epistemic theoretical virtue – in other words, that the simpler an (uncertain contingent) theory is, the more likely it is to be true. This is not to say, of course, that for any two theories that are not equally simple, the simpler one is always more likely to be true. For example, one theory that is simpler than another might also be *less* probable because it has

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5 One might object that, even if divinity requires omnibenevolence, there are religiously adequate concepts of God that do not include omnipotence and omniscience. That may be so, but substituting a finite but still very powerful and wise God for an omnipotent and omniscient one makes Theism less simple and does not raise its predictive power with respect to the data of good and evil all that much.

much less predictive power. If, however, two theories are otherwise equally epistemically virtuous, then the simpler of the two is more likely to be true. Among those who believe that simplicity is an epistemic virtue, there is much disagreement about what exactly simplicity is and *why* it makes a theory more likely to be true. On many theories of simplicity (especially theories that equate simplicity with ontological parsimony or with elegance), Naturalism and Supernaturalism will turn out to be equally simple, because they have exactly the same ontological commitments, they employ exactly the same concepts, and neither can be formulated more concisely than the other.

If, however, coherence is a facet of simplicity, then not everyone will agree that Naturalism and Supernaturalism are equally simple because not everyone will agree that they are equally coherent – that their “parts” fit together equally well. Some will claim that, simply by examining the concepts of the physical and the mental, one can discern either that the physical is more likely to be an original cause of the mental or vice versa. Others, following Hume, will deny that we can, simply by examining the noncausal properties of an entity, know unaided by any experience what that entity’s effects or causes are likely to be. If Hume is right about this, then the conclusion that Naturalism and Supernaturalism are equally coherent will be hard to resist.

Much more needs to be said here, but suppose, at least for the sake of argument, that Naturalism and Supernaturalism are equally simple in every alethically significant sense of “simple.” Then it is easy to show that Naturalism is much simpler than Theism, because it is easy to show that Supernaturalism is much simpler than Theism. Theism is, after all, a very specific version of Supernaturalism and so has much more content than Supernaturalism. Theism says everything Supernaturalism says, but it also makes three claims that are not entailed by Supernaturalism, namely, that a single being is responsible for the physical world, that this being is a personal, and that this personal being is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. Having less content – that is, decreasing one’s risk of error by making fewer claims or by making a less specific claim or by making a claim that is narrower in scope, and so on – is an important facet of simplicity and is rather obviously theoretically virtuous. For example, theories (like Kepler’s) that postulate a small number of laws are, *other considerations held equal*, regarded as more likely to be true than theories (like Copernicus’s and Ptolemy’s) that postulate a large number of laws. The upshot here is that, because Theism has much more content than Supernaturalism, while Naturalism and Supernaturalism are, we are assuming, of equal content, it follows that Theism has much more content than Naturalism and so is to that extent much less simple than Naturalism.

One final point about the argument’s first premise. If classical theists object that the God they believe in exists necessarily and so Theism says nothing contingent about the world, the appropriate response is that adding necessary existence to the attributes already mentioned just adds an additional risky claim to the theistic hypothesis, and so makes it even less simple and thus less *epistemically* probable, not more.

### *Predictive power*

The heart of the argument from evil sketched earlier is its second premise, which says that Naturalism has much more predictive power than Theism with respect to “the data of good and evil.” The term “predictive power” is used broadly here, so that it covers cases of prediction in the strict sense as well as cases of retrodiction. In other words, premise 2 says



that we have much more reason to expect the data in question on the assumption that Naturalism is true than on the assumption that Theism is true. Without going into details, the facts about good and evil I have in mind include facts about physical pleasure and pain, flourishing and floundering, virtue and vice, and triumph and tragedy. I assume in this chapter the truth of “experientialism,” which says that only conscious beings have moral standing because only they can be literally benefited or harmed – that is, made better or worse off from their own internal point of view.

To appreciate at least the plausibility of this second premise, imagine two alien beings that are much like us in intellectual ability and who are gradually learning everything we know (and nothing more) about our biosphere. To make their predictive successes and failures more clearly relevant to what we should say about the second premise, let us also suppose that these two beings know almost nothing about themselves and do not take into account what they do know when they engage in theoretical reasoning. One of these alien beings is named Natty; Natty is a naturalist. The other alien is Theo, who needless to say is a theist. Having already acquired a great deal of information about Earth and its inhabitants, Natty and Theo begin to acquire the data of good and evil. As these data slowly trickle in, Natty and Theo try to predict what they will soon learn about the conscious beings on Earth. I contend that, at various stages in this process, Natty will more accurately predict the data than Theo will. One reason for this – the only reason I will point out in this chapter – is that the assumption that Theism is true, but not the assumption that Naturalism is true, undermines the justification for certain (accurate) predictions based on Theo’s and Natty’s shared background information.

For example, after learning that human beings and some other animals feel (physical) pain and pleasure, Natty and Theo may consider the question of what role pain and pleasure play in the lives of human beings and animals. Having previously learned that many other parts of organic systems play a fundamentally biological role – they systematically promote survival and reproduction – Natty may predict, at least tentatively, that pain and pleasure play a similar role, especially since they are so well suited to function in that way. Theo has much less reason to make this prediction. He will note that pain and pleasure have a special sort of moral significance that other parts of organic systems do not have. There is good reason for Natty to ignore this difference, to regard it as an irrelevant dissimilarity when she reasons analogically about what role pain and pleasure are likely to play in the world. Theo, however, should not be confident at all that this moral difference will turn out to make no difference. God might very well treat pain and pleasure differently from other parts of organic systems. So Theo has much less reason than Natty to expect to learn that pain and pleasure play the biological role that in fact it turns out they do play. Therefore, Natty’s Naturalism makes possible a more accurate prediction than Theo’s Theism.

Of course, it is possible to suffer much from physical pain and still flourish and it is possible to suffer little, feel much physical pleasure, and yet never flourish. Thus, we may suppose that, while Natty and Theo know a great deal about the distribution of physical pain and pleasure on earth, they do not yet know anything substantive about how flourishing and floundering are distributed among the sentient beings in the world. We may also suppose that, prior to learning anything about that, they learn that very many plants die before they ever have a chance to flourish, that very many others languish for much or all of their lives, and that even plants that flourish for much of their lives eventually wither and die. Before learning more, they consider the question of whether the sentient beings



on earth (including of course human beings) suffer the same fate as plants. Is death at a very young age common? Do very many animals barely survive, languishing for most or all of their lives? Do the ones that manage to flourish for a time still face decay and death in old age?

Being a naturalist and (like Theo) seeing a connection between these ecological facts and the operation of natural selection, Natty expects to learn that the answers to these questions are all “yes.” Of course, there is an interesting moral difference between plants and conscious animals, since the latter, unlike the former, can be made worse off from their own internal point of view; and when Natty reasons analogically from facts about plants to the likelihood of similar facts obtaining in the case of animals, she will ask herself whether her inference is undermined by this difference. In other words, she will ask whether she has any reason to believe that this dissimilarity between conscious animals and plants is a relevant one. Because she is a naturalist, however, she will with good reason answer that question negatively. For relative to Naturalism combined with all of the information Natty and Theo already have about the physical (and mental) world, it is highly probable that evolution is unguided and, most importantly, blind to moral considerations.

Theo’s Theism, on the other hand, gives him substantial *prima facie* reason to believe that these dissimilarities are relevant; for he believes that the ultimate cause of evolution and of all ecological, botanical, and zoological facts is an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God. Such a God, being omniscient, is well aware that flourishing in the biological sense can benefit some animals (but no plants), and languishing can harm them. Being omnipotent, such a being would be as well positioned as possible to ensure, either by directly intervening in the world or by manipulating the laws and initial conditions of the universe, that all or almost all sentient animals flourish for at least most if not all of their lives. And being omnibenevolent, such a being would, other moral considerations held equal, want such beings to flourish. So Theo, if he is reasonable, will regard the analogical reasoning that Natty used when she inferred that sentient life will fare no better than nonsentient life to be virtually worthless. Clearly, he would be foolish to predict on the basis of what he knows about plants that large numbers of conscious animals either die young or survive but languish for most or all of their lives. (Keep in mind we are assuming the truth of experientialism here; so the objection that if God has a moral justification for allowing many plants to flounder, then it is likely that God also has a moral justification for allowing many animals to flounder is misplaced.)

Of course, Theo recognizes that both his knowledge of possible goods and evils, and his knowledge of entailment relations between goods and evils are very limited. Thus, he realizes that there might be moral reasons unknown to him for the theistic God he believes in to bring about a biosphere in which virtually all conscious beings feel a significant amount of biologically useful physical pain and in which many conscious beings fail to flourish and so fail to achieve the good for which they appear to be designed. He also recognizes, however, that he has at least as much reason to believe that God would have reasons *unknown* to him *not* to create a world of that sort. Thus, it is the known reasons that must break the tie, and those are reasons to create an animal world in which physical pain is rare and in which extended flourishing is the rule rather than the exception. So even though Theo is not sure what his God will do – a point so-called skeptical theists love to emphasize – he certainly cannot simply dismiss as irrelevant, either the moral differences between pain (or pleasure) and other parts of organic systems or the moral differences between conscious animals and nonconscious living things; but this means that he cannot be even close to as

confident in the relevant analogical inferences that Natty uses to make her predictions. Of course, the conclusion of those analogical arguments is true. So when the relevant data comes in, Natty will turn to Theo and say: "See? I told you so. Naturalism has much more predictive power with respect to these data than Theism does." A bit snotty perhaps, but logic is on her side.

Much more could be said about how Naturalism compares with Theism when it comes to predicting various facts about good and evil. For example, Natty would find further reason to prefer Naturalism to Theism when her and Theo learn about the mixture of moral virtue and vice among terrestrial moral agents. And especially shocking to Theo would be the added revelation that all of the pain, floundering, and vice in the world is not counterbalanced by an abundance of great (this-worldly) triumph. Indeed, triumph is the exception and tragedy the rule on our planet, where the deepest and the best aspirations of human beings are routinely crushed by a variety of circumstances beyond their control.

### *Theistic responses*

Theists might respond to Humean arguments from evil in a variety of ways. First, they might challenge the arguments offered in support of the premises. In the case of the specific Humean argument discussed in this chapter, theists might, for example, point out that I have focused only on some facets of simplicity, ignoring others, and that I have focused only on some of the data of good and evil, ignoring others. A full defense of the argument's first two premises would need to address these concerns. Theists might also object to premise 2 by pointing out that the data of good and evil entail the existence of complexity, life, consciousness, moral agency, and so on, and that these things are evidence favoring Theism over Naturalism. This objection, however, is based on a misunderstanding of the argument. I assume that the existence of these things is part of the background information relative to which Naturalism's and Theism's predictive power with respect to the data of good and evil is assessed. In other words, Natty and Theo acquired such data before they begin making the predictions discussed earlier. Thus, these other data are relevant to premise 3, not to premise 2.

Of course, a theist could grant the truth of the first two premises of the argument and challenge the third premise. For example, as just suggested, a natural theologian might contend that much of what Natty and Theo learned before they ever became aware of the various data of good and evil strongly favors Theism over Naturalism. For example, they might claim that Theism has more predictive power than Naturalism with respect to the fact that the world is complex without being chaotic, not to mention very beautiful, that it includes a variety of objective deontic moral facts, and that it has produced living organisms, including most notably a variety of sentient beings, some of which are agents capable of acting (contrary to their own perceived best interests) for moral, aesthetic, and religious reasons. In my opinion, this sort of objection to the argument has the best prospects for success (which is not necessarily to say that the prospects are good).

Reformed epistemologists would raise a different objection to the third premise. They would reject it on the grounds that each of us has a *sensus divinitatis*, a special truth-aimed cognitive faculty that, when functioning properly in an appropriate environment, gives us very powerful noninferential evidence for the truth of Theism. It is important to emphasize that as most Reformed epistemologists who are not confused about the significance of cognitive science of religion would admit, there is no proof that we have such a faculty. Further, even if we do, most of us apparently do not have one that functions properly, since

most people either have little or no inclination to believe in God or believe in God only because they were taught at a young age that God exists, not because they have lively “theistic experiences” that would have sufficed to produce belief even without early indoctrination. This shows that, while the Reformed epistemologist’s objection to premise 3 may have apologetic value (of the negative sort), it has limited philosophical significance, because none of the Reformed epistemologist’s claims are incompatible with the argument’s third premise being true *relative to the epistemic situations of the vast majority of human beings*.

Another theistic response to the argument would be to challenge its second premise by constructing auxiliary hypotheses about how certain goods logically require evil or its risk. Such hypotheses are sometimes called theodicies (see Part II of this volume). (Here I use the term “theodicy” broadly to refer to any theistic explanation of the data of good and evil, whether it is claimed to be a true explanation or merely a possible or plausible one.) Theodacists would try to use these hypotheses to enhance the predictive power of Theism with respect to the data of good and evil. Whether or not this strategy succeeds depends in part on how likely it is (prior to taking into account the data of good and evil) that the auxiliary hypothesis is true assuming that Theism is true. It also depends on how well Theism combined with the auxiliary hypothesis explains or “predicts” the data of good and evil. Less obviously, it depends in part on how much Theism conjoined with the auxiliary hypothesis mystifies (i.e., renders less predictable) other data.

Unlike theodacists, skeptical theists would challenge the second premise by trying to show that, because of our cognitive limitations, we are in no position to assess Theism’s predictive power with respect to the data of good and evil (see Chapter 29). I have already argued that the success of such a challenge is unlikely, because it is possible to defend the second premise without inferring directly from Theism what kind of world God is likely to create. Instead, that premise can be defended by showing that (i) our background information gives us various reasons to expect the data of good and evil and (ii) while the assumption that Naturalism is true does not undermine those reasons, the assumption that Theism is true does undermine them (in part because of the cognitive limitations to which the skeptical theist appeals). It is also worth mentioning that, unlike Martin and Rowe, the defender of a Humean argument from evil can agree with the skeptical theist that, if God exists, then we should not expect to be able to discern potentially God-justifying reasons for allowing the evils we find in the world. All that follows from that claim, however, is that our inability to discern such reasons is not strong evidence against Theism. It does not follow that the evils themselves are not much less expected given Theism than given atheism (or some specific atheistic alternative like Naturalism), and so it does not follow that the evils themselves are not strong evidence against Theism (or that they do not strongly favor some specific atheistic alternative like Naturalism over Theism).<sup>6</sup>

## Reflections on Explanation and Draper’s Argument (by Trent Dougherty)

### *The structure of the argument*

Draper begins with a semiformal argument, and there is a fairly simple way to see that it is valid. Bayes’s Theorem has just three terms: the prior, the likelihood, and the evidence

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to two reviewers and to Trent Dougherty for helping me to strengthen the first half of this chapter.

being considered (which is eliminable either by considering the odds form of Bayes's Theorem or by expanding it via the Theorem of Total Probability). So if we take the prior probability to be a measure of the intrinsic simplicity as measured by content, and we take the predictive power to be measured by the likelihood, then Draper's argument is equivalent to an application of the odds form of Bayes's Theorem (Figure 5.1) with respect to a body of evidence  $E$  plus the proviso (to represent premise 3) that there is no broader set  $E'$  such that the evidential situation is reversed.

$$\underbrace{\frac{\Pr(H_p | \text{Evidence})}{\Pr(H_d | \text{Evidence})}}_{\text{Posterior Odds}} = \underbrace{\frac{\Pr(\text{Evidence} | H_p)}{\Pr(\text{Evidence} | H_d)}}_{\text{Likelihood Ratio}} \times \underbrace{\frac{\Pr(H_p)}{\Pr(H_d)}}_{\text{Prior Odds}}$$

Figure 5.1

Obviously, if both the likelihood ratio and the prior odds are top-heavy, so will the posterior odds be. So here is the version of the Bayesian argument from evil as I think of it mapped onto Draper's premises. Let 'T' denote Theism, 'N' denote Naturalism, and 'E' denote the evidence under consideration (Figure 5.2).

|           |   |           |   |       |
|-----------|---|-----------|---|-------|
| Pr(N   E) | = | Pr(E   N) | x | Pr(N) |
| Pr(T   E) |   | Pr(E   T) |   | Pr(T) |

Figure 5.2

- (1) The second multiplicandum is top-heavy.
- (2) The first multiplicandum is top-heavy.
- (3) There is no body of evidence  $E'$  such that  $E \subset E'$  and 1, 2 are false, when  $E'$  is substituted for  $E$ .
- (4) So the left quantity of the equation is top-heavy.

If this is a faithful explication of Draper's argument, then I accept that it is valid. The premises will be treated in reverse order.

### *Premise 3*

Draper freely admits that "a natural theologian might contend that much of what Natty and Theo learned *before*<sup>7</sup> they ever became aware of the various data of good and evil

<sup>7</sup> He does not address the question of what they learn *after* they learn the data about good and evil. For example, the data about religious experiences, cases of numinous perception. For here is a plausible story: The evidence Draper gives favors atheism to exactly the degree that the data of natural theology favors Theism. And if one comes to the data of religious experience with even odds on Theism, then Theism will become overwhelmingly probable.

strongly favors Theism over Naturalism”<sup>8</sup> (emphasis added), and of course this is just what many theists, Swinburne most notably, have argued. Draper’s intention is to separate out that possible theistic counter-evidence and compare it with the antitheistic evidence from evil later. Then one can compare the evidence pro and con. There is nothing wrong with this method, but I am not sure it takes into account what the theist knows *a priori* and how this might affect the predictions she makes.

This problem seems to threaten the argument under consideration quite significantly. Does one know, when one comes to the scene in the story, that courage, say, is a very great good? Does one know that courage, real courage, requires significant risk of harm? Does one know that forgiveness is the highest virtue? Does one know that forgiveness requires offense and that the greatness of the forgiveness is proportionate to the greatness of the offense? These are things which many theists think they know by reflection. Thus they are things that many theists think ought to be brought into the theater and used in their predictions in Draper’s thought experiment. If Theo, then, brings such things with him, then it is not at all clear that he will make the predictions Draper suggests. He may predict that “the rain will fall on the just and the unjust alike,” lest reality turn into a petty morality play. He may, as he reasons through what he ought to predict, reason like this:

What should I expect from God? Well, I should expect him to bring about or promote the realization of the highest goods. And what are the highest goods? They are exemplification of the highest virtues: Faith, Hope, Love, Courage, Wisdom, Justice, Humility, Sympathy, Compassion, and, especially, Forgiveness. So what must God do to see to it that these virtues are (or have a significant possibility of being) realized? Well, there must be (or be the serious risk of) the sorts of adverse, even dire, and perhaps horrendous circumstances which are the logical preconditions of these greatest of all possible goods. So then, though it didn’t come to mind at first, I suppose I should expect these bad, even terrible, circumstances to be realized.

So not only may there be strong theistic arguments in the background evidence, there may well be a theodicy lurking in the background as well.

### *Premise 2*

The key claim in Draper’s case for premise 2 is that Theo’s belief in Theism undermines the justification for certain accurate predictions that Naturalism does not undermine. Theodical concerns have already been raised about premise 2, but it is worth looking at the structure of the predictions in detail. Consider Natty and Theo’s relative basis for prediction of the following:

<sup>8</sup> The story is not perfectly clear as to when the participants show up on the scene. We are told that the participants are “gradually learning everything we know (and nothing more) about our biosphere,” which makes it seem like they have perhaps arrived just after the cooling of the Earth’s crust or thereabouts. So even though we are told that they have “already acquired a great deal of information about Earth and its inhabitants,” we do not know, for example, what they know about the origins of first life. Since there is no well-confirmed naturalistic theory about the origins of first life, the most that could be in their background information when they show up is that at some point *t* there was no life and at some later point *t’* there was life. One false prediction a naturalist might be expected to make is that the planet will remain lifeless for hundreds of billions of years. Because I do not know if Natty and Theo were around then, I do not know if this kind of evidence against Naturalism is in the set that Draper intends to set aside.

P1: Pain and pleasure will systematically promote survival and reproduction.

They both have as part of their evidence:

E1: Many other parts of organic systems play a fundamentally biological role.

E2: Pain and pleasure have a special sort of moral significance that other parts of organic systems do not have.

Where they differ is that Theo conditionalizes also on Theism and Natty on Naturalism (as we are bracketing the concerns raised earlier about the evidence for Theism she might show up with). Draper says that Natty, but not Theo has reason to regard E2 as irrelevant. That means that for Natty, using 'Prob-Name(X | Y)' to denote the probability of X on the assumption that Y for the person named:

$$C1 \text{ Prob-Natty}(P1 | E1 \& E2 \& N) = \text{Prob-Natty}(P1 | E1 \& N).$$

In such a case, we say N "screens off" E2 from E1. This is not so for Theo. But why not? Here is a thought. God would be interested in moral properties, so if God is exercising providence, then the moral properties would play more than a merely biological role. But if there is no such being as God, then the moral properties will be causally inert. If this is the reasoning, though, the prediction needs to be slightly modified by adding a "merely" in the right spot:

P1': Pain and pleasure will *merely* systematically promote survival and reproduction.

But of course that would not help the naturalist for that prediction would be inaccurate. For pain and pleasure play a role in forms of moral reasoning, which seem to make no contribution to survival and reproduction or, at least, do more than just that. Decisions by medical organizations to reduce pain in laboratory animals on moral grounds make no significant contribution to the survival or reproduction of those animals, since they are almost all either spayed, neutered, or destroyed after they have served their purpose. And examples could be multiplied. Still, perhaps there is a prediction in the neighborhood that fits the naturalist bill:

P1\*: Pain and pleasure will *predominantly* systematically promote survival and reproduction.

This allows for the kinds of cases that cause problems for P1'. However, it implicates a proposition that entails the following:

P1#: Pain and pleasure *somewhat* play roles which do not systematically promote survival and reproduction.

And it is not clear that this is significantly more predicted on N than T. So there is plausibly an unaccounted for item of evidence for Theism involved at this stage. However, Draper mentions another prediction he thinks favors N over T.

Next, Theo and Natty add the following items of evidence:

- E3: Many plants die early, many flounder throughout their lives, most<sup>9</sup> plants that flourish eventually wither and die.  
 E4: Plants evolve by natural selection.  
 E5: E4 explains E3.

Draper then directs our attention to another prediction:

- P2: Sentient beings (including humans) will suffer essentially the same fate as plants.

E5 will only be plausible on certain understandings of natural selection, but we can assume that some relevant bridge principle connecting the development of plants with the development of sentient beings is plausible. Plausibly, though not obviously, E4 makes probable that

- E6: Sentient beings will evolve by natural selection.

So here are the questions we have to consider in this section, where ‘ $\gg$ ’ means “is much greater than” and ‘B’ denotes the background evidence (which at this point is E1 & E2<sup>10</sup>):

- Q1: Is it the case that: Prob-Natty(P2 | E3, . . . , E6 & N & B) > Prob-Theo(P2 | E3, . . . , E6 & T & B)?  
 Q2: Is it the case that: Prob-Natty(P2 | E3, . . . , E6 & N & B)  $\gg$  Prob-Theo(P2 | E3, . . . , E6 & T & B)?

Obviously, a negative answer to Q1 entails a negative answer to Q2. As per P1/C1 (see Premise 2 earlier), Draper thinks that N screens off E2 from the rest of the evidence. T, however, does not screen it off and may, plausibly, be said to make P2 contraindicated. For the theist might predict that the moral significance of pain would make a difference to how it was distributed. Presumably, the difference would be that it would be correlated with moral desert and such (again, we here bracket the theodical worries raised earlier).

To return to QQ1-2, assume that Natty and Theo also learn the following:

- E7: Humans will have a capacity to suffer *in excelsis*, including psychologically.  
 E8: Humans will have a capacity to actualize the capacity in E7 in one another.

If we let Q3 be just like Q1 but with these two new items of evidence added in, then it is very plausible that Q1/Q3 should be answered in the affirmative. Draper’s logic is clear: Even if T&E2 does not make too much of a difference, it will likely make *some* difference to P2. That is, T&E2 give Theo *some* reason to predict P2 false, but the naturalist utterly disregards E2, so she is dead on accurate about P2. This assumes that P2 is true, which some theists may wish to dispute. Whether the answer to Q2 is affirmative, on the other hand, is harder to judge, because it may depend on a finer-grained judgment than many people take

9 “Most” rather than “all” because there are plants that have been alive for thousands of years, possibly some for very long times and show no signs of dying. This is a fairly trivial matter, however.

10 Though we have already noted that E2 is screened off by N.



themselves to be reliable at making. It is one thing to be in a position to judge that one quantity is greater than another; it is quite another to be in a position to judge that the inequality is very large.

Finally, we can give a more precise cast to the theodical worries. The question was posted earlier: Are Natty and Theo aware of the following facts?

- E9: The exemplification of virtues like courage, sympathy, forgiveness, and mercy are among the highest goods a world could exemplify.  
 E10: The exemplification of the virtues in E9 requires significant suffering to actually occur.

For if so, this may cast doubt on the following claim by Draper:

Natty would find further reason to prefer naturalism to theism when her and Theo learn about the mixture of moral virtue and vice among terrestrial moral agents. And especially shocking to Theo would be the added revelation that all of the pain, floundering, and vice in the world is not counterbalanced by an abundance of great (this-worldly) triumph.

We may express the possible effects of the theodicy on this claim this way. Consider this question:

- Q4: Is it the case that:  $\text{Prob-Natty}(P2 \mid E1, \dots, E10 \ \& \ N \ \& \ B) > \text{Prob-Theo}(P2 \mid E1, \dots, E10 \ \& \ T \ \& \ B)$ ?

A theodical theist will answer “No” to this question even if she answers “Yes” to Q3. She will also answer “No” to Q2.

### Premise 1

Content is a very plausible way to measure simplicity and so prior probability, but there are several plausible ways of thinking about the content of a theory. One route to go is to use an information-theoretic account of simplicity. Forster (2001) discusses a couple of different accounts. Here is an analogy. Suppose we are judging the relative simplicity of two model universes, ours and an alternative universe AU. When we want to assess the simplicity of our universe, how would we do so? One method would be to count up all the things our universe contains: diamonds, daffodils, dogs, and so on and see how many there are. Even if we counted only types (which would be misguided), this would in a way exaggerate the simplicity of our universe. Consider the Standard Model (SM) in particle physics (Figure 5.3).

SM posits 16 fundamental particles that fit into three categories. Let us assume that two kinds of reductionistic theses are false. First, let us rule out *levels reductionism*: the thesis that biological and chemical facts are *nothing but* complex redescrptions of the physical facts. Next, let us rule out a kind of *parts reductionism*: the thesis that composite objects are *nothing but* the sum of the simples which compose them. Even with these kinds of “nothing buttery” ruled out, there is something clearly right in the notion that the right way to assess the complexity of our cosmos is to refer to SM. For SM tells you, in some sense, what is *fundamental* to the universe.

Some theists think that the simplicity of a theistic universe should be assessed similarly. (See Swinburne 2004, chapter 5 for one such proposal, which is similar to what follows.)



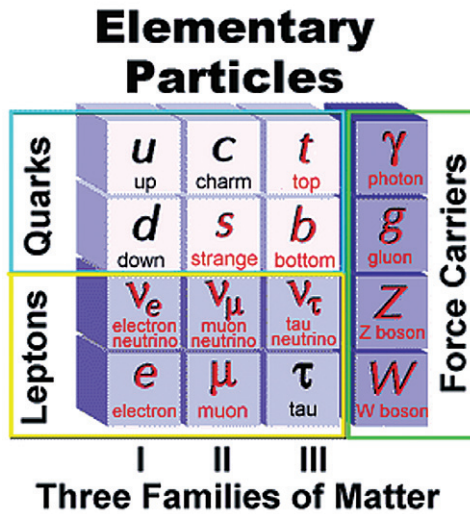


Figure 5.3

Theism postulates one brute fact and the rest flows from that in conjunction with necessary truths about value. Bare Theism's brute fact is the existence of a person with two properties – knowledge and power<sup>11</sup> – held in the simplest possible way – zero limitation. The explanation of every contingent truth (other than his own existence, if that is taken to be contingent, an issue too big for the present discussion) is a function of the goodness of the corresponding state of affairs. Since there is no best world, an arbitrary choice must be made as to which initial world segment to actualize among sufficiently good initial world segments (this wording allows for the universe to unfold in ways perhaps unforeseen even to God, if it contains beings with free will or if it contains certain kinds of chance processes). If having a good deal of chance in that world is best, then that world will be expected to have a good deal of chance. So if one applies a method of assessing the complexity of the physical universe to assessing the complexity of the theistic hypothesis, Theism turns out to be a very simple hypothesis indeed.

Naturalism lacks this kind of explanatory simplicity and systematicity. There will be quite a number of brute facts: the existence of contingent beings, the existence of a number of laws, the many particular parameters of those laws, and so on. Counting up the number of brute facts in Naturalism by the same method used earlier will be difficult but it seems that inevitably it postulates more than one brute existent with only two properties held in the simplest ways.

Of course, there are other methods of assessing simplicity, and it could be that there is some plausible one which would favor Naturalism. The ultimate success of Draper's Humean argument would depend on there being such a measure. It is worth noting, however, that there are measures on which it seems it would not succeed.

<sup>11</sup> Unlimited power plausibly entails perfect freedom, and Swinburne (2004, 99ff.) argues that God's perfect knowledge, power, and freedom entail his perfect moral goodness and other essential divine attributes.

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# A Carnapian Argument from Evil

## (Welcome Back, Skeptical Theism)<sup>1</sup>

RICHARD OTTE

Discussions of the problem of evil have often made use of logical tools developed by philosophers. For example, Plantinga's use of modal logic and subjunctive conditionals greatly increased our understanding of the deductive argument from evil (Plantinga 1974). The use of these formal tools allows us to see more clearly various assumptions that were often made in the literature, and to generate powerful critiques of certain arguments. Recently, Michael Tooley (2012, Plantinga and Tooley 2008) has attempted to apply insights from inductive logic to the inductive or probabilistic argument from evil. Tooley believes the only way to show certain evidence makes it more likely than not that God does not exist is by bringing inductive logic to bear on the question (Tooley 2012, 146). Tooley's resulting arguments are the most sophisticated and detailed versions of the inductive argument from evil that have been presented to date. Although Tooley uses inductive logic to critique previous versions of the inductive argument from evil, in this chapter, we will limit ourselves to discussing arguments from evil that Tooley develops. In the first section, we will begin by briefly looking at some background information. The second and third sections will present Tooley's arguments, and the last two sections contain detailed analyses of these arguments.

### *Rightmaking and wrongmaking properties*

Tooley's arguments make use of rightmaking and wrongmaking properties; the basic idea is that if an action possesses at least one rightmaking property and no wrongmaking property, then the action is morally obligatory or morally permissible. And if an action possesses at least one wrongmaking property and no rightmaking property, then the action is morally wrong.<sup>2</sup> Tooley further assumes that these two properties are quantitative and that we can

1 The subtitle of Tooley (2012) is "Farewell to Skeptical Theism."

2 One might object that the rightness or wrongness of an action is relevant to agents; some acts permissible for God may be impermissible for humans. We will ignore this worry here.

measure and compare degrees of rightmaking and wrongmaking properties. An action is *prima facie* wrong if, relative to our information about its rightmaking and wrongmaking properties, the weight of its known wrongmaking properties is greater than the weight of its known rightmaking properties (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 116). Tooley's first argument considers a specific evil and our knowledge of rightmaking and wrongmaking properties, and claims that it is *prima-facie* wrong for God to allow that evil to occur. The conclusion of Tooley's first argument is the "somewhat modest, though not insignificant" conclusion that the probability of God existing at a certain time is less than 1/2 (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 135). His second argument looks at the consequences of there being many cases of evil that are *prima facie* wrong, and he uses this to argue for the stronger conclusion that the existence of God is extremely unlikely, all things considered.

### *The principle of indifference*

Although many philosophers doubt the existence of any adequate account of objective probability, let us suppose that Tooley is correct and that some adequate account of objective probability can be developed. One way to assign objective probabilities is to appeal to the principle of indifference and the classical interpretation of probability. The classical interpretation defines probability in terms of the ratio of favorable to equiprobable cases, and relies on the principle of indifference to determine what cases are equiprobable.<sup>3</sup> According to the principle of indifference, two propositions are equally probable if there is no reason to favor one over the other. As is well-known, this results in inconsistent probability assignments to the same proposition (van Fraassen 1989; Hájek 2010). van Fraassen (1989) gives an example of a cube about which we know each side is between 0 and 1 in long; thus, the area of the side of the cube is between 0 and 1 in<sup>2</sup>, and the volume of the cube is between 0 and 1 in<sup>3</sup>. Consider the following three propositions about the cube:

- A: The side of the cube is between 0- and 1/2- in long.
- B: The area of a side of the cube is between 0 and 1/4 in<sup>2</sup>.
- C: The volume of the cube is between 0 and 1/8 in<sup>3</sup>.

As for A, there is no reason to prefer a side of the cube being between 0 and 1/2 in, and between 1/2 and 1 in, so the principle of indifference would have us assign a probability of 1/2 to the length being between 0 and 1/2 in<sup>2</sup>. As for B, there is no reason to prefer one of the following four possibilities: the area of a side is between 0 and 1/4 in<sup>2</sup>, the area is between 1/4 and 1/2 in<sup>2</sup>, the area is between 1/2 and 3/4 in<sup>2</sup>, or the area is between 3/4 and 1 in<sup>2</sup>. We thus assign 1/4 to the probability of the area being between 0 and 1/4 in<sup>2</sup>. As for C, there appear to be eight possibilities that we have equal reason for: the volume could be between 0 and 1/8 in<sup>3</sup>, between 1/8 and 1/4 in<sup>3</sup>, . . . , or between 7/8 and 1 in<sup>3</sup>. Thus the principle of indifference has us assign a probability of 1/8 to the volume being between 0 and 1/8 in<sup>3</sup>. But these three probability assignments are inconsistent, because propositions A, B, and C are equivalent, yet receive three different probabilities. The principle of indifference has directed us to assign probabilities of 1/2, 1/4, and 1/8 to the same proposition. Because of this, the classical interpretation of probability must be rejected. This problem

3 See Hacking (1984) for an insightful discussion of the classical interpretation and the principle of indifference.

arises when the principle of indifference is unrestricted and applies to all propositions. Philosophers who wish to defend the principle of indifference need to limit the domain of propositions that it applies to; it cannot apply to all propositions without inconsistency. In what follows, we will see that Tooley's arguments make use of a restricted version of the principle of indifference.

## Tooley's First Argument

Although Tooley presents his first argument with great precision in 21 steps, going through each step runs the danger of missing the overall force of his argument. However, giving a brief summary of his argument risks missing important subtleties and details of his argument. In what follows, we will try to steer between these two errors, hoping to bring out the most important steps in his argument. To that end, the structure of Tooley's argument is as follows:

- (1) We know that choosing not to prevent the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 is *prima facie* wrong. In other words, this action has a wrongmaking property (over 50,000 people died) and we do not know of any rightmaking property of sufficient strength that counterbalances this wrongmaking property.
- (2) For any action whatever, the logical probability that the total wrongmaking properties of the action outweigh the total rightmaking properties – including ones of which we have no knowledge – given that the action is *prima facie* wrong, is greater than one half.
- (3) The logical probability that an action is morally wrong, all things considered, given that the action is *prima facie* wrong, is greater than one-half (from (2) and basic truths about logic and ethical concepts).
- (4) The logical probability of choosing not to prevent the Lisbon earthquake is morally wrong, all things considered, given that choosing not to prevent the earthquake is *prima facie* wrong, is greater than one-half. (from (1) and (3))
- (5) The logical probability that God does not exist, all things considered, given that choosing not to prevent the Lisbon earthquake is *prima facie* wrong, is greater than one-half (from (4)).
- (6) The logical probability that God does not exist, all things considered, is greater than one half. (from (1) and (5)).<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that this argument is probabilistic, concrete, and deontological. Tooley notes that the crucial and most controversial step is (2), which brings in the probabilistic elements of

<sup>4</sup> I emphasize that this is a very brief summary of Tooley's argument; his complete argument can be found in Tooley (Plantinga and Tooley 2008). Our version uses the concept of being *prima facie* wrong, whereas Tooley's argument uses the concept of having "a wrongmaking property that we know of, and that there are no rightmaking properties that are known to be counterbalancing." Tooley's argument also uses the concept of God not existing at the start of the Lisbon earthquake; I have replaced that by God not existing, since most theists think it a necessary truth that God does not begin to exist. The statements in this version of the argument are very similar to statements in Tooley's argument. Our premise (1) corresponds to Tooley's (15); our premise (2) corresponds to Tooley's (16); our (3) corresponds to Tooley's (19); our (4) is Tooley's (20); and our (5) is Tooley's (21). Tooley does not draw the conclusion (6), but I include it because many will make this inference.

his argument. It is important to note that this argument is not claiming that there is a *prima facie* reason to think the probability of God existing is less than 1/2. The argument begins with the Lisbon earthquake being *prima facie* wrong and has the strong conclusion that all things considered, the probability that God does not exist is greater than 1/2.

## Tooley's Second Argument

Tooley's second argument looks at multiple simultaneously preventable evils and has the "much stronger conclusion that the existence of God is extremely unlikely" (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 117). The basic idea is to extend the conclusion of the first argument by looking at cases where God was obligated to prevent several states of affairs. The premise is that there are states of affairs  $S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n$  at some time such that allowing each of these to occur is *prima facie* seriously wrong, based on the known rightmaking and wrongmaking properties; Tooley gives the example of death and aging as examples of evils God should have prevented (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 142). Tooley's second argument uses ideas from Carnap's work on inductive logic to conclude from this that the existence of God is extremely unlikely. Tooley argues that the individual pieces of evidence have a cumulative impact, and this results in a much stronger conclusion than that of the first argument. Remarkably, Tooley does not use the controversial inductive premise (2) from his first argument in this second argument. By using Carnap's inductive logic, Tooley is able to avoid the use of premise (2) and end up with an even stronger conclusion.

### *Non-Carnapian version of Tooley's second argument*

Tooley's argument has not received much discussion in the literature, and one reason may be the difficulty in understanding Carnap's ideas on probability. This is unfortunate, for it deserves serious consideration. Although Tooley's second argument relies heavily on the framework of Carnap's inductive logic, in this section, we will modify his argument so that it uses a more general approach to logical probability without relying on the details of Carnap's approach. It may be easier to understand Tooley's second argument if we first develop a version of his argument that does not rely on Carnap's theory, before looking at his actual argument. This will introduce us to the basic structure of Tooley's argument, without being distracted by the details of Carnap's theory.

Suppose probability is based on a measure applied to possible worlds; each world will receive a weight (possibly all the same), and the probability of a statement will be the sum of the weights of the worlds it is true in.<sup>5</sup> We could then say that two or more statements are equally probable if the weights of the worlds they are true in are equal. So, for example, the probability of a coin coming up heads on a certain toss is equal to its coming up tails if the weights of all the worlds in which a toss comes up heads equals the weights of all the worlds in which the coin comes up tails. Of course, developing a theory of logical probability along these lines is far beyond the scope of this chapter, if it is even possible, but we only need the basic intuitive idea of this approach for our purposes.

5 I leave open whether this is defined for all worlds, or only a specified set of worlds. I will also ignore serious technical problems that arise in trying to formulate an adequate probability function that ranges over uncountably many worlds.

We assume there are  $n$  events that are *prima facie* wrong; each is such that given what we know, it is wrong for God to permit the event to occur. Consider the following statements:

- None of the events are permissible by God.
- Only one of the events is permissible by God.
- Only two of the events are permissible by God.
- ...
- All but one of the events are permissible by God.
- All of the events are permissible by God.

Each of these statements are true in various possible worlds, and the worlds in which each statement is true have a basic structure in common. So, for example, worlds in which only one of the events is permissible by God are worlds that may differ on which event is permissible by God, but they share the fact that only one of those  $n$  events is permissible by God in that world. And worlds in which only four of the events are permissible by God will differ on what four events are permissible, but they all share the feature that only four events are permissible. We will say these worlds share a basic world structure; they differ only on what individuals have certain properties.

The crucial premise for this version of Tooley's argument is that each world receives a weight such that each of these world structures are equally probable. From this, it immediately follows that each of the earlier statements are equally probable. Since there are  $n + 1$  equally probable statements, each receives a probability of  $1/(n + 1)$ . In the earlier statements, we are interested in the last one, which is that all of the  $n$  events are permissible by God; this is because that statement is the only one of the earlier statements that is consistent with the existence of God. God's existence implies that every event that occurs is permissible by God, and if even one of the  $n$  events that occurs is not permissible by God, then God does not exist. This immediately implies that the probability of God existing is less than or equal to the probability that all of the  $n$  events are permissible by God. Since the probability that all of the events are permissible by God is  $1/(n + 1)$ , It follows that the probability that God exists is less than or equal to  $1/(n + 1)$ . Since the number  $n$  of events that are *prima facie* wrong is very large, the probability of God existing is very low.

Admittedly, this is a very crude and simplified version of Tooley's second argument, but it captures much of the structure of his argument while having the virtue of being easier to understand. We will now turn our attention to Tooley's actual second argument. In order to do so, we must first look at some of Carnap's ideas about logical probability.

### *Carnap's inductive logic*

Carnap's Logical Foundations of Probability (Carnap 1950) was the most detailed study of logical probability and inductive logic of its time. Even today, Carnap is the philosopher we think of when we mention inductive logic or logical probability. Although the details of Carnap's theories can be very complicated, the ideas are usually simple and intuitive. Carnap defined several logical relations in languages that could play the role of logical probability. Although more metaphysically minded individuals may wish to define logical probability in terms of measures over possible worlds, Carnap chose to instead define it in terms of complete descriptions within a language, which he calls "state descriptions."

Carnap uses versions of the principle of indifference in assigning probabilities, but he restricts the application of the principle. This results in a consistent theory that still makes use of the principle of indifference.

To begin, assume we have a first order language with identity in which there are a finite number of basic one-place predicates; there are no relations. According to Carnap, state descriptions are descriptions of possible states of the universe describable by the language. Roughly put, they are maximal consistent conjunctions of atomic sentences such that every atomic sentence or its negation will be a conjunct in the state description. This is easiest to see by example. Suppose we have a language with three individuals and one basic property; we then have eight state descriptions:

- (1)  $Fa \ \& \ Fb \ \& \ Fc$
- (2)  $Fa \ \& \ Fb \ \& \ \neg Fc$
- (3)  $Fa \ \& \ \neg Fb \ \& \ Fc$
- (4)  $\neg Fa \ \& \ Fb \ \& \ Fc$
- (5)  $Fa \ \& \ \neg Fb \ \& \ \neg Fc$
- (6)  $\neg Fa \ \& \ Fb \ \& \ \neg Fc$
- (7)  $\neg Fa \ \& \ \neg Fb \ \& \ Fc$
- (8)  $\neg Fa \ \& \ \neg Fb \ \& \ \neg Fc$

For every individual, each state description either affirms that the individual has that basic property or denies that the individual has the property. These state descriptions are complete descriptions of possible worlds in the language.

Once we have state descriptions, we can use them to define various concepts of logical probability. The basic idea is that the probability of a sentence, such as  $Fa$ , will be a function of all the state descriptions that the sentence is true in. The simplest way to get the probability of a sentence, proposed by philosophers such as Pierce, Keynes, and Wittgenstein, is to simply divide the number of state descriptions in which the sentence is true by the total number of state descriptions. Although this is a perfectly consistent probability function, Carnap rejects it because it has the consequence that the probability of  $Fa$  is independent of whether individuals  $b$  and  $c$  also have predicate  $F$  (Salmon 1967). The claim is that this probability relation should be rejected because it precludes learning from experience.

To avoid this problem, Carnap notes that we can assign different weights or measures to the individual state descriptions, and base the probability on these measures.<sup>6</sup> We will say that the weight of a statement is the sum of all of the weights of state descriptions in which the statement is true. We can then identify the probability of a statement with its weight, and the conditional probability of  $h$  given  $e$  as the measure of the weight of  $h \ \& \ e$  divided by the measure of the weight of  $e$ .<sup>7</sup> So, for example, the probability of  $Fa$  is the sum of the weights of state descriptions 1, 2, 3, and 5, the probability of  $Fb \ \& \ Fc$  is the sum of the weights of state descriptions 1 and 4, and the probability of  $Fa$  given  $Fb \ \& \ Fc$  is the weight of state description 1 divided by the sum of the weights of state descriptions 1 and

6 The sum of the weights of the state descriptions must sum to 1, and each state description receives a weight greater than 0.

7 Here, with Carnap, I assume the conditional probability of  $h$  given  $e$  is equal to the probability of  $h \ \& \ e$  divided by the probability of  $e$ .



4. It is clear that different ways of assigning weights to the state descriptions will result in different probability functions. The simple probability function discussed earlier resulted from assigning each state description equal weight. Carnap introduces the notion of structure descriptions as a way to retain the intuition behind the earlier probability function while avoiding the problems it faces.

According to Carnap, structure descriptions are descriptions of possible structures the world might have; they do not tell us which individuals have various properties, but only that the world has a certain structure. So, for example, our language with one property and three individuals has four structure descriptions: all individuals have property F, two individuals have property F, one individual has property F, and no individuals have property F. Carnap proposes that we assign equal weight to all structure descriptions, instead of equal weight to all states descriptions. Carnap also says two state descriptions are isomorphic if they have the same structure without regard to individuals. Carnap thinks that inductive logic, like deductive logic, should treat all individuals equally, with none getting special treatment. For this reason, he also proposes that all isomorphic state descriptions get the same measure.<sup>8</sup> The following chart shows the weight assigned to each state description, given that equal weight is assigned to structure descriptions and to isomorphic state descriptions.

| Structure Description | State Description                      | Weight |
|-----------------------|--|--------|
| All have F            | {(1) $Fa \& Fb \& Fc$ }                | 1/4    |
| Two have F            | {(2) $Fa \& Fb \& \neg Fc$ }           | 1/12   |
|                       | {(3) $Fa \& \neg Fb \& Fc$ }           | 1/12   |
|                       | {(4) $\neg Fa \& Fb \& Fc$ }           | 1/12   |
| One has F             | {(5) $Fa \& \neg Fb \& \neg Fc$ }      | 1/12   |
|                       | {(6) $\neg Fa \& Fb \& \neg Fc$ }      | 1/12   |
|                       | {(7) $\neg Fa \& \neg Fb \& Fc$ }      | 1/12   |
| None have F           | {(8) $\neg Fa \& \neg Fb \& \neg Fc$ } | 1/4    |

We thus see that the probability of  $Fa$  is the sum of the weights of state descriptions 1, 2, 3, and 5, which is  $1/4 + 1/12 + 1/12 + 1/12 = 1/2$ . The probability of  $Fb \& Fc$  is the sum of the weights of state descriptions 1 and 4, which is  $1/4 + 1/12 = 1/3$ . Thus the probability of  $Fa$  given  $Fb \& Fc$  is equal to the weight of state description 1 divided by the sum of the weights of state descriptions 1 and 4, which is  $1/4$  divided by  $1/3 = 3/4$ . This probability function, which results from assigning equal measures to structure descriptions and to isomorphic state descriptions, is what Tooley uses in his argument.<sup>9</sup>

### *Tooley's use of Carnap's theory*

Tooley is interested in situations in which we have  $n$  events, all of which are *prima facie* wrong for God to allow. The problem is to determine the probability that there are

<sup>8</sup> These are known as symmetrical measure functions

<sup>9</sup> For ease of presentation I am ignoring Tooley's use of maximal predicates, which are maximal combinations of basic predicates in the language. See Plantinga and Tooley (2008, 138). There are many problems facing Carnap's theory of probability. For some recent discussion of his theory applied to philosophy of religion see Pruss (2010).

unknown rightmaking and wrongmaking properties such that it is permissible for God to allow all of the events to occur. Clearly, it would be extremely difficult to calculate this probability using Carnap's system; Tooley notes that there could be an infinite number of possible unknown properties with different strengths. For this reason, Tooley does not attempt to calculate the probability that it is permissible for God to allow all of the  $n$  events. Instead, Tooley's strategy is to calculate an upper bound for that probability. Tooley makes various assumptions that will overestimate the probability that it is permissible for God to allow all  $n$  events to occur. This means that the actual probability that it is permissible for God to allow the events must be less than the value Tooley arrives at. Tooley argues that this upper bound is extremely low, and from this it follows that the actual probability that it is permissible for God to allow all the  $n$  events is also extremely low.

To understand Tooley's argument, let us say that a structure description is seemingly negative if at least one of the  $n$  events is such that it is *prima facie* wrong for God to allow it to occur. We will say a structure description is unknowingly positive if all of the unknown rightmaking and wrongmaking properties are such that all actions of allowing those events are morally right. In other words, if we look only at the unknown properties, none of the actions of allowing those events is either morally wrong or neutral.<sup>10</sup> We will also say that a structure description is completely acceptable if none of the actions are morally wrong, when all of the rightmaking and wrongmaking properties are taken into account, whether known or unknown.<sup>11</sup> In other words, when we use both the unknown and known properties to judge the actions, the structure description is completely acceptable if it is permissible for God to allow all of the events to occur. Thus, we see that the concept of being unknowingly positive looks only at the unknown properties, but the concept of being completely acceptable looks at both the known and unknown properties. Clearly, structure descriptions that are seemingly negative cannot be completely acceptable without also being unknowingly positive. Since we are assuming that each of the  $n$  actions are morally wrong for God to perform, if judged only on the known rightmaking and wrongmaking properties, in order for all of these actions to be permissible for God, it must be the case that there are unknown rightmaking properties that counterbalance the known wrongmaking properties. Thus, our structure descriptions being completely favorable implies that they are also unknowingly positive. From this, it follows that the probability that one of our structure descriptions is completely favorable is less than or equal to the probability that the structure description is unknowingly positive; the probability of the structure description being unknowingly positive places an upper bound on the probability that it is completely acceptable.

Tooley then develops a formula that gives an upper bound on the probability that a structure description is unknowingly positive, given that there are  $k$  unknown morally significant properties. To do this, Tooley applies a second-order principle of indifference to the situation where there are  $k$  first-order unknown properties:

10 The accounts of Plantinga and Tooley (2008) and Tooley (2012) differ here; I am following the approach in the latter.

11 For ease of understanding I have slightly changed some of Tooley's terminology. My concept of a structure description being unknowingly positive is the same as Tooley's concept of a structure description being positive, and my concept of a structure description being completely acceptable is the same as his concept of a structure description being favorable.

The central point here is that each of the  $(k+1)$  possibilities with regard to the number of unknown properties that are rightmaking rather than wrongmaking must be treated as equally likely. . . . so when the method of structure-descriptions is applied to properties and properties of properties, if one has two first-order properties, and a second-order property, it must be taken as equally likely that none of the first-order properties has the second-order property, that one first-order property does, and that both first-order properties do. (Tooley 2012, 156)

Thus Tooley assigns each structure description equal probability. So, for example, if we have one unknown property  $P$  and  $n$  actions, it will be equally probable that none of the actions have  $P$ , that one of the actions has  $P$ , that two of the actions have  $P$ , . . . , and that all  $n$  of the actions have  $P$ .

If we have  $k$  unknown properties and  $n$  actions, Tooley uses  $P(k,n)$  to designate the probability that a structure description is unknowingly positive (Tooley 2012, 156). Tooley shows this is equal to

$$P(k,n) = \left( \frac{k}{k+1} \right) \left( \frac{1}{n+1} \right)$$

From this, we can get an upper bound on  $P(k,n)$ :

$$P(k,n) \leq \left( \frac{1}{n+1} \right)$$

(Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 141; Tooley 2012, 159)

Thus, we see that  $1/(n+1)$  is the maximum value of the probability that one of the structure descriptions could be unknowingly positive. From this, it follows that  $1/(n+1)$  is also the upper bound of the probability that a structure description could be completely favorable.<sup>12</sup>

Tooley uses this to argue that the probability that God exists is extremely low. We have shown that the probability that it is morally permissible for God to allow all of those  $n$  events to occur is less than  $1/(1+n)$ . Tooley then notes that the number  $n$  of events that are *prima facie* wrong for God to permit is very high; he gives death and dying as examples (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 142). From this, it immediately follows that  $1/(1+n)$  is extremely low, which is the probability that all of the events are permissible by God. What this means is that it is extremely likely that some event occurs that it is morally wrong for God to allow. This immediately implies that it is extremely unlikely that God exists, given what we know about evil in our world. What is remarkable about this second argument is the conclusion does not depend upon the number of unknown properties or on the proportion or strength of unknown properties that are rightmaking as opposed to wrongmaking; it only depends upon the number of events that are *prima facie* evil.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that if instead of basing inductive logic on structure descriptions we were to use the state description approach we discussed, then the upper bound on  $P(k,n)$  would be  $1/2^n$  (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 150). For  $n > 1$ , this is less than the upper bound of  $P(k,n)$  that we get by using the structure description approach. Thus, using the state description approach instead of the structure description approach actually gives a lower upper bound for the probability that all of the events are permissible by God.

## Problems Facing Tooley's Second Argument

In order to understand some of the problems with Tooley's second argument, it may help if we first look at an argument that Tooley does not explicitly develop or endorse.<sup>13</sup> Suppose that we have  $n$  *prima facie* wrong events and that whether or not there are unknown right-making properties that justify God in permitting these events are independent of each other. Furthermore, suppose that for each of these, the probability that there is an unknown rightmaking property that justifies God in permitting the event is .99; thus the probability that there is no unknown property that justifies God in permitting the event is .01. If there are 69 of these independent events, according to this argument, the probability that all of them have some unknown rightmaking property that justifies God in permitting them is less than 1/2; this follows from the conjunction axiom of probability. If there are 250 of these events, the probability drops to less than .01. There are many events (more than 250) that we do not know of a good reason for God to permit, and thus the probability that God has good reasons to permit all of them is less than .01. Since God existing implies that God has a good reason to permit any evil that occurs, the probability that God exists given the facts about these evils is less than .01.

The central assumption of this argument is that God having a good reason to permit each evil is independent of God having a good reason to permit other evils. In other words, whether God has a good reason to permit a specific evil is independent of whether God has a good reason to permit any of the other evils, or even all of the other evils. We have good reason to reject this independence assumption; there being a good reason to permit one evil makes it more likely that there is a good reason to permit the other evils. For example, suppose there is a good reason for God to permit a certain earthquake to occur; given this, it is now more likely that there is a good reason for God to permit other earthquakes to occur, and more likely there is a good reason to permit other events, such as hurricanes, to occur. Various proposals as to what reason God could have to permit natural evils to occur have been proposed, and these proposals often apply to many types of natural evils. For example, some have proposed that natural evil, such as humans dying in earthquakes, is a result of God creating an orderly and predictable world (Swinburne 1998; van Inwagen 2006). According to these proposals, the value of a world that is regular and governed by physical laws is worth the cost of the suffering that various natural events bring about. It should be clear that if a proposal such as this was successful in giving God a good reason to permit a specific earthquake, such as the Lisbon earthquake, it would also be successful in giving God a good reason to permit other specific natural disasters. We have no reason to think that whether the various events are ultimately permissible by God are independent of one another. For this reason, the argument we are considering fails; it makes an assumption that we have good reason to reject.

Now let us consider Tooley's second argument. Tooley notes that the central assumption is that each structure description is equally likely. This means that it is equally probable that God has a good reason to permit all of the events, that he has a good reason to permit

13 See Plantinga and Tooley (2008, 135) for Tooley's reasons for rejecting it. A version of this argument can be found in Hasker (2010, 25).

only one of the events, only two of the events, only three of the events, . . . , and all of the events. However, we have reason to reject this assumption, just as we rejected the independence assumption in the earlier argument. Crudely put, it seems implausible that the probability that God has a reason to permit exactly one hurricane is the same as the probability that he has a reason to permit exactly 35 hurricanes, or exactly a million hurricanes. I am not arguing in favor of any specific theodicy, but am only pointing out that Tooley's argument relies on a very controversial assumption. One might appeal to the principle of indifference, but there is no reason to think the principle of indifference should be used here to support assigning structure descriptions equal probability. Tooley needs to provide a reason to assign equal probability to the structure descriptions; without this, his argument will be unconvincing. Thus, Tooley's main argument fails, because it is based on an assumption that many will reject. Furthermore, it is worth noting that this argument cannot be salvaged by appealing to the state description approach to inductive logic. Assigning all state descriptions the same probability faces the same problems as earlier.

Tooley's second argument was an attempt to strengthen the more "modest" claims of his first argument, by looking at the number of evils for which we do not know a good reason for God to permit them. The problem with this approach is that God's reason for permitting one of these evils will most likely apply to other evils, and we have been given no reason to reject this view. For this reason, Tooley's second argument is not successful.

## Problems Facing Tooley's First Argument

Given that Tooley's second or main argument is unsuccessful, let us turn our attention to his more modest first argument. The key premise in Tooley's first argument is (2), which is equivalent to the following:

- (2) For any action whatever, the logical probability that the total wrongmaking properties of the action outweigh the total rightmaking properties – including ones of which we have no knowledge – given that the action has a wrongmaking property that we know of, and that there are no rightmaking properties that are known to be counterbalancing, is greater than 1/2. (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 120)

One very natural way to support (2) would be to argue that it is the result of a simple inductive generalization. Given that all rightmaking properties that we know of are insufficient to counterbalance the wrongmaking properties of various natural evils, one might extend this and conclude that no rightmaking properties are sufficient to counterbalance the wrongmaking properties of natural evil. This approach is the basis of Rowe's (1979) influential argument, which is arguably the most widely recognized version of the inductive argument from evil. However, Tooley rejects this argument, because any defense of it would rely on very controversial assumptions (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 125–126).

Since Tooley rejects the most common way of supporting claims like (2), he gives an alternative justification for (2) based on what he sees as general considerations about inductive logic. Tooley thinks that the probability that there is an unknown rightmaking property of certain strength is equal to the probability that there is an unknown wrongmaking property with opposite strength. Given this, Tooley proposes the following symmetry principle:

*The Symmetry Principle with Respect to Unknown, Rightmaking, and Wrongmaking Properties:*

Given what we know about rightmaking and wrongmaking properties in themselves, for any two numbers, M and N, the probability of there being an unknown rightmaking property with a moral weight between M and N is equal to the probability of there being an unknown wrongmaking property with a (negative) moral weight whose absolute value is between M and N. (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 129)

This symmetry principle supports premise (2). Since actions such as the Lisbon earthquake have wrongmaking properties that we know of, the question is how likely it is that it has unknown rightmaking properties that can counterbalance the known wrongmaking properties. According to Tooley's symmetry principle, it is just as likely that any unknown properties relevant to the Lisbon earthquake are wrongmaking as they are rightmaking, and thus it is just as likely that the Lisbon earthquake is worse than we thought as it is that it is better than we thought, when all properties, known and unknown, are taken into account. According to Tooley, even if we appeal to unknown properties, it is still more likely than not that events such as the Lisbon earthquake are seriously wrong, and should not be permitted by God.

Many philosophers, independently of Tooley's argument, are skeptical of abstract metaphysical principles, such as the symmetry principle. For example, Peter van Inwagen argues that although we may be reliable in making local moral judgments, there is little reason to suppose we are reliable when making moral judgments that are far from our experience (van Inwagen 2006). Although van Inwagen does not discuss Tooley's argument, his reasoning can easily be extended to claim we have little reason to think our minds are reliable when making second-order probability judgments about ethical properties. One can be skeptical about abstract principles, such as the symmetry principle, without being skeptical about ordinary moral judgments. Tooley's argument will be ineffectual against those inclined toward van Inwagen's approach.

Plantinga responded to Tooley's argument by claiming that we have no reason to think the symmetry principle is correct. Plantinga admits we have no reason to think it is incorrect, but that does not mean that we should think it correct:

Well, I'd certainly concede that it [the Symmetry Principle] doesn't seem particularly implausible; but of course that's not the same as its seeming plausible. I can't see how we could have any reason at all for thinking it true – or, for that matter, for thinking it false. How would we know? (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 173)

Tooley needs to give us a reason to accept it; merely not having a reason to reject it is not a reason to accept it. In what follows, I will argue that using the symmetry principle to support (2) is very problematic, and we have reason to think the symmetry principle is false. I will first argue that rationality does not require us to accept the symmetry principle. I will then argue, *contra* Plantinga, that we have reason to think the symmetry principle is false.

Let us begin by considering two number guessing games that will help us understand our intuitions surrounding the symmetry principle. In the first game, suppose you are told we have a finite collection of positive and negative integers, but you do not know what specific integers are in it. Integers can appear more than once in the collection, or not at

all. You are then asked how likely you think it is that the sum of the integers in the whole collection is greater than 0.

There are various ways one might reason about this situation. One might use something like the symmetry principle and reason that for any integer  $n$ , it is just as likely that  $n$  is in the collection as  $-n$  being in the collection. Based on this, one might think it very likely that the sum of the collection is equal to 0. One problem with this reasoning is that there seems to be no reason to support the claim that  $n$  and  $-n$  are equally likely to be in the collection, over several other possibilities, such as:

For any positive integer  $n$ ,  $-n$  is as likely as  $n^2$  to be in the collection.

For any positive integer  $n$ ,  $n$  is as likely as  $-n/2$  to be in the collection.

For any positive integer  $n$ ,  $-n$  is as likely as  $n + 10$  to be in the collection.

For any positive integer  $n$ , the probability of  $-n$  being in the collection is 0.

If any of these are true, one might think that it is more likely than not that the sum of the collection is greater than 0. The issue comes down to whether we have reason to adopt the symmetry principle over any number of other alternatives. Without further information about the collection, it is difficult to see any reason to prefer one of these possibilities over the others.

When faced with no reason to adopt one position over another, some recommend the policy of assigning each position equal probability; this is the intuition behind the principle of indifference. However, the principle of indifference is very problematic, and we have no reason to think it applies to situations like this. In situations like this, one need not form the strong belief that the positions are equally probable; forming the belief that they are equally probable goes beyond our evidence, which is that we do not see any reason to prefer one option over the other. It is for this reason that Salmon (1967) described basing probability values on ignorance as “epistemological magic.”

Now some rational people may go beyond our evidence in this way, but other rational people may be more modest in their epistemic commitments and will hesitate to commit to firm beliefs about probabilities in these situations. Their response is to simply withhold judgment on whether the sum is greater than 0. We are told very little about the numbers in the collection, and thus we have no basis for forming beliefs about the probabilities of numbers in the collection. Simply being ignorant of the distribution of numbers in the collection is no reason to assign equal probability to the collection containing  $n$  and  $-n$ . Assigning an event probability of  $1/2$  is to make the strong claim that the event and its negation are equally likely, but, as in situations like this, we may have no reason to think that is the case. Because of this, withholding judgment is a safer response. Although going beyond our evidence and assigning the events equal probability may be rationally permissible, we certainly are not obligated to do so.

The relevance of this to Tooley’s use of the symmetry principle is clear. Just as we knew nothing about the distribution of numbers in the earlier game, we know little about the distribution of unknown rightmaking and wrongmaking properties. Tooley has given us no reason to assign probabilities in accord with the Symmetry Principle; thus, we may rationally reject Tooley’s symmetry principle and premise (2), and instead simply withhold judgment on these probabilities. It may be rationally permissible to accept the symmetry principle and assign probabilities in accord with it, but it is certainly not rationally obligatory. Rationality permits us to withhold judgment about whether unknown wrongmaking properties of a certain strength are as likely as unknown rightmaking properties of opposite



strength. As Plantinga says, "The right attitude, here, is abstention, withholding belief" (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 173).

But we can go further and give reasons why someone who does not want to withhold judgment should reject the Symmetry Principle. Suppose we consider a different game that relaxes one of the restrictions on the first game. In this game, we remove the restriction that the numbers in the collection be finite, and we allow positive infinite numbers into the collection.<sup>14</sup>

For reasons that will become clear shortly, we do not allow negative infinite numbers into the collection. So, for example, the collection could contain Aleph-Null, but not negative Aleph-Null. In this situation, many may still want to withhold judgment about how likely the sum of the collection is greater than 0. After all, we still have been told nothing about how numbers came to be in the collection. But others will be inclined to say the sum is greater than 0. In this game, there is clearly no symmetry between positive and negative values, and because of this, some may hold that it is more likely that the sum is greater than 0. In this game, one can withhold judgment or hold that the sum is greater than 0, but one should not hold that the sum being less than zero and the sum being greater than zero are equally likely. In other words, the Symmetry Principle has no appeal for this game and should be rejected.

Now suppose that the situation concerning rightmaking and wrongmaking properties is analogous to this second game: there can be infinitely strong rightmaking properties but no infinite wrongmaking properties. In this case, there is no symmetry between rightmaking and wrongmaking properties, because there are no unknown wrongmaking properties of infinite strength. But then Tooley's premise (2) should be rejected; we have no reason to think that relevant unknown wrongmaking properties are as probable as unknown rightmaking properties.

There are many similarities between the situation concerning rightmaking and wrongmaking properties and this second game. Tooley claims that judged from an *a priori* point of view, the likelihood of there being a relevant rightmaking property of a certain weight is no greater than the likelihood of there being a relevant wrongmaking property of the same but negative weight. (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 128). He then says that we do not know anything that changes this judgment, and so from an *a posteriori* point of view, the existence of a wrongmaking property of certain weight is no less likely than the existence of a rightmaking property with opposite weight (Plantinga and Tooley 2008, 128). This is the basis of Tooley's Symmetry Principle, but traditional theists will reject this argument. According to traditional theism, good and evil do not differ simply with one having opposite strength of the other. Instead, evil is seen as a distortion or perversion of the good (Augustine 1955, book VII, chapter XII). Thus, one can have good without evil, but there is no evil without good; there is pure good, but no such thing as pure evil. Good and evil are asymmetrical in very important ways; not every good has a corresponding evil of equal but negative strength. Because of the asymmetry between good and evil, theists will not hold that unknown rightmaking and wrongmaking properties are equally likely. Thus, theists have good reason to reject Tooley's premise (2), which is the central probabilistic assumption in his argument. Tooley's argument relies on very controversial assumptions; thus, his more modest first argument is not successful.

14 For our purposes, we can here ignore any difficulties in defining summation for this collection.



## Conclusion

Tooley has presented a very sophisticated version of the problem of evil that has doubtless furthered our knowledge of the issue. His precision and use of formal inductive logic is impressive, and hopefully will receive more attention in the literature. In this chapter, we were only able to briefly look at two of his arguments, and we were unable to discuss many of the issues that arise in these arguments. Ultimately, Tooley's two main arguments fail, because they rely on very controversial assumptions. However, Tooley's discussion of the problem of evil is notable for its scope and comprehensiveness, and provides material for much further research.

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# The Experience of Evil and Support for Atheism

JEROME GELLMAN

Arthur Schopenhauer was convinced that repeated experiences of horrendous evils would justifiably cause a person to come to believe that God did not exist. Here is part of what Schopenhauer wrote on this in *The World as Will and Representation*:

If we were to conduct the confirmed optimist through the hospitals, infirmaries, and surgical operating-rooms, through the prisons, torture-chambers, and slave-kennels, over battle-fields and places of execution; if we were to open to him all the dark abodes of misery, where it hides itself from the glance of cold curiosity, and, finally, allow him to glance into the starving dungeon of Ugolino, he, too, would understand at last the nature of this “best of possible worlds.” For whence did Dante take the materials for his hell but from this our actual world? . . . The miseries of life can so increase and this happens every day that the death which hitherto has been feared above all things is eagerly seized upon. (Schopenhauer 1909, I, 419)

In this quote, we are to imagine that when a person experiences many horrendous evils, she will come to believe that life was irredeemably nasty and brutish, from which, Schopenhauer intended, she would form the belief that God does not exist.

My cousin Binyamin became a nonbeliever due to his years of witnessing and enduring horrendous Nazi atrocities. One of his grotesque experiences occurred on Christmas Eve, 1943, at the Auschwitz work camp, Buna. The Nazi officers ordered Binyamin with all the camp’s Jews into the main yard, ordering them to stand in rows, without moving. Holiday merriment was everywhere. The Nazi officers stood proudly in their dress uniforms. A huge, glorious, magnificently ornamented Christmas tree gave out the Good News; and, on a festively decorated stage, the band played sweetly endearing Christmas songs. Then they hung seven Jews on the branches of the holiday tree. And the band played on.

Binyamin had lived as an Orthodox Jew until the War. Thereafter, he gave up religion and God for sadness and sorrow. While visiting Binyamin at the seniors’ home where he lived in Jerusalem, he told me that the previous Sabbath he had visited the synagogue at the home. I asked Binyamin, “Does this mean that you are starting to return to religion?”

Binyamin looked far off, as though seeing something through the distance of time, and he said: "I saw righteous people who were full of Torah, whose whole life was serving God, they knew nothing else and desired nothing else, and they were brutally murdered, in front of my eyes, in the most horrifying ways imaginable." And then he added this: "I miss it. I yearn for it. It was the love of my youth. I want to pray. But you can't convince me . . . You can't convince me." My cousin Binyamin had lost his belief in God, even if regretfully, by his experiences of horrendous evil.

From experiences of horrendous evil, a person might formulate a typical *argument from experienced evil* (see Chapter 4). That would be an argument using a premise describing experienced evils ("I had excruciating pain for six weeks.") together with premises about God's nature and principles about what we could expect from God concerning evil. The conclusion would be that the evil was not (or probably not) justified and God did not exist (or probably did not exist.)

It strikes me that in cases like Schopenhauer's tour of horrendous evils and my cousin Binyamin's witnessing and enduring of atrocities, belief in God's nonexistence might come not by way of an argument from the experience of evil but from other kinds of support. Accordingly, I will put aside typical arguments from experienced evil. Instead, my first focus will be on how experiences of evil can provide support for atheism by analogy with how philosophers have claimed experiences apparently of God provide support for theistic belief. Later, I will sketch other ways that atheism gets support from experiences of evil, ways not analogous to how philosophers have thought of theistic experience but yet not quite arguments from experience of evil.

I will say that experience, E, of evil, *supports* a belief, B, for a person, S, when E provides epistemic justification for B for S, or else E grounds B for S. I distinguish between *direct* and *mediated* support for atheism coming from the experience of evil. I will say that an experience (or a set of experiences) E of evil gives a *direct* support, D, for a belief, A, in atheism when: (1) E supports A, and (2) there is no element in D essential to E's support of A that is brought about by E (other than, at most, S's belief that E occurred). One way for experience of evil to *directly* support atheism would be for a person just to "see" right there in the evil experienced that God does not exist. This is the kind of *grounding* support that being appeared to *treely* gives to one who just *sees* that there is a tree in front of him. Another form of direct support would be when a person infers from the occurrence of E, all by itself, that (probably) God did not exist.

I will say that E yields a *mediated* support, M, for A when (1) In M, E does not support A directly, and (2) in M, E supports A by giving rise to elements essential for the support of A for S. E can afford both direct and mediated support for A. I will say that experience, E, of evil gives a *propositionally mediated* support, P, to the belief, A, that God does not exist, for a person S, when (1) in P, E does not give direct support for A, and (2) in P, E gives direct support for the belief, I, *that the evil experienced is irredeemable*, and either S infers A from I, or A is grounded for S in S's state of believing I.<sup>1</sup> In propositionally mediated support for atheism, either a person sees right there in the experience that this evil is irredeemable, or infers that straightway from the experience, and then infers the atheism, or else has the atheism formed in him from his believing that this evil is irredeemable. The

1 It is a long story, not for now, but I am assuming a rather standard concept of God that excludes open theism. On the latter, it might turn out that irredeemable evil is compatible with the existence of God.

support for atheism comes from a proposition intervening between E and the belief that God does not exist.

The first part of this chapter will concern direct and propositionally mediated support that atheism gains from experiences of evil. The second will sketch mediated ways of support for atheism other than propositionally mediated support, ways philosophers have neglected. My conclusion will be that experiences of evil provide support for atheism. From that it does not follow that experience of evil provides adequate support for atheism. Support comes in degrees, including inadequate support. Also, even adequate support from experience of horrendous evil can be defeated by counter-support. Indeed, as I argue elsewhere, theists can argue for support from alleged experiences of God in the same way I sketch here the support for atheism. (Gellman, forthcoming) So, theistic experiences offer counter-support to the support I hereby grant to experiences of evil. My conclusion here, then, is the cautious one that atheism gets some nonargumental support from experience of evil, perhaps even a fair amount.

There are three major positions by analytic philosophers on behalf of positive epistemic import of theistic experiences for belief in God, without passing through an argument: (1) Richard Swinburne's Principle of Credulity, (2) William Alston's Doxastic Practice Approach, and (3) Alvin Plantinga's Proper Functionalism. I consider each for an analogy to direct or propositionally mediated support for atheism from the experience of evil.<sup>2</sup>

## Richard Swinburne's Principle of Credulity

Richard Swinburne endorses a principle he calls "the Principle of Credulity":

(PC) It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that *x* is present, then probably *x* is present. (Swinburne 1991, 254)

In the "epistemic" sense of "seems," for Swinburne, "It seems to *S* that *O* is present," means that *S* is inclined to believe *O* is present based on his present experience. "Special considerations" refers to reasons to think or suspect that *x* had not been present to the subject, or reasons to think that the subject's experience is impugned by other evidence. Accordingly, Swinburne writes that "a religious experience apparently of God ought to be taken as veridical unless it can be shown on other grounds significantly more probable than not that God does not exist" (Swinburne 1991, 254).

Swinburne's Principle of Credulity applies to experience of evil for the belief that God does not exist. Swinburne's principle applies to its seeming that a particular object is present. In the case of direct support for atheism, the object that seems to be present would be an irredeemable evil. By analogy to Swinburne's Principle of Credulity, if it seems to a person that he is witnessing an irredeemable evil, then there exists a reason in favor of believing the evil irredeemable, from which atheism follows. He will have propositionally mediated support for believing God does not exist.

<sup>2</sup> There is a paucity of literature on the topic of this essay. See my earlier treatment of this topic in, Gellman (1992). See also Plantinga (2000, 481ff.).

However, the idea behind the Principle of Credulity does not dictate restricting it to seeming to see an *object*. For at the heart of the principle lies the idea that to avoid skepticism we must assume that what experientially seems to us is the case.<sup>3</sup> Swinburne formulated his principle for an object seemingly present only because he was interested in applying it to experiences where God seems to be present. With the same rationale against skepticism, Swinburne could have formulated his principle for any experiential epistemic-seeming to belief pair. Hence, if a person experiences an evil which seems to be irredeemable, then the belief that it is irredeemable would have Swinburnian support.

The following objection was raised by an astute anonymous reader: It does not seem possible for an evil's being irredeemable to be given in experience. Being irredeemable is just not the sort of thing that can be an object of experience. After all, an evil is irredeemable only if unjustified in every possible world or, at least, in every possible world relevantly similar to ours. How could this modal character of irredeemability possibly be experienced? It seems that Swinburne's principle could not apply here. In reply, I should point out that this objection will cause problems for one who endorses direct Swinburnian justification for theism from alleged experiences of God. God, after all, is supposed to be perfectly good, powerful, knowledgeable, and eternal. This characterization includes modal elements. For example, that God is perfectly powerful entails what God *can* do in every possible world, or, at least, in every possible world relevantly similar to ours. If it is going to provide direct support for belief in God, without any other input, the Principle of Credulity will have to support these modal elements directly. If so, users of the principle cannot easily deny using it for the belief of irredeemable evil on modal grounds.

Now for a direct reply. The objector might be thinking that for the irredeemability of an evil to be given in experience, the irredeemability must be an experienced datum, like the color of a table is an observed datum within an experience of a table. Yet it is hard to imagine how irredeemability could possibly be a datum of experience. However, when saying that the irredeemability of an evil is experienced, we need not mean what the objector might mean by that. To say that irredeemability is experienced need mean no more than that when faced with the evil it seems to be irredeemable. The irredeemability need not be a datum in the experience, like the color of a table. I do not mean that the evil seems to the subject irredeemable because she surmises that it is irredeemable, or is unable to think up a moral justification for it. Within the very act of experiencing of the evil, the person is struck by its irredeemability, experiences it *as* an irredeemable evil, in a way similar to how a person, experiencing an overwhelming, invisible love might be struck by its being God's love and experience it *as* such. Think of the evil as being experienced as so horrendous that to the subject, it wears its clear moral unjustifiability demonstratively on its face. Swinburne argues that we must allow epistemic seemings *prima facie* positive epistemic import if we are to escape skepticism. If so, seemings of irredeemability should be included.

3 Swinburne argued as follows against philosophers who would disallow his principle:

Such writers do not seem to me to be aware of the skeptical bog in which failure to accept the Principle of Credulity for other experiences will land them. If it is all right to use it for other experiences, they need a good argument to show that it is not all right to use it for religious experiences. (Swinburne, 1991, 254, footnote 1)

I have critiqued Swinburne's argument from skepticism for the Principle of Credulity in Gellman (2008).

I conclude that if we follow Swinburne, we should deem experience capable of supporting the belief that irredeemable evil exists, just as it can support belief that God exists. Is the experiential value for the first as good as that for the other? An experience that engenders belief in God is reinforced by a long history of similar events in different cultures and by varying types of people. This strengthens the epistemic value of seeming God-experiences. Do experiences of seemingly irredeemable evil leading to atheism match in frequency and variegation that of seeming experiences of God? I will not pursue that issue here. Suffice to say that an approach like Swinburne's can provide direct support for the nonexistence of God.

### William Alston's Doxastic Practice Approach

William Alston says that a *doxastic practice* "involves a family of ways of going from grounds – doxastic and experiential, and perhaps others – to a belief with a certain content" (Alston 1991, 100). And: "A doxastic practice can be thought of as a system or constellation of dispositions or habits . . . each of which yields a belief as output that is related in a certain way to an input" (Alston 1991, 153). A doxastic practice, then, is a practice of forming and epistemically evaluating beliefs (the "output") from various cognitive inputs together with an override system. Alston defined an "override system" as what "determines how we go from *prima facie* to unqualified justification, as such, it has a crucial bearing on what outputs are ultimately approved" (Alston 1991, 189).

Alston argues that the justification of every doxastic practice is "epistemically circular," that is, its reliability cannot be established independently of the practice itself. The support for the reliability of any doxastic practice, including for its override system, is always internal support, which already assumes the reliability of the practice. However, we cannot avoid engaging in doxastic practices. Therefore, it is rational to engage in the doxastic practices we do engage in provided there is no good reason to think they are unreliable. Unreliability could come, for example, from the emergence of internal inconsistency in the practice or from inconsistency between a practice and other practices that have veto power over it.

There is a Christian mystical doxastic practice, says Alston. It mandates taking certain kinds of experiences as intake, running them by an override system and forming religious beliefs, such as that God is helping me in my life. Hence, as with all doxastic practices, in practical terms, it is rational for a person who participates in a Christian mystical practice to continue doing so until it can be shown to be an unreliable practice. The Christian doxastic practice confers positive epistemic import on designated experiences for the belief that God exists or that God is acting in various ways toward us.

When asking whether there can be Alstonian support for believing one has experienced irredeemable evil, one might want to point out that for Alston, a doxastic practice must be socially established. However, there is no socially established doxastic practice endorsing going from what *seems* to be irredeemable evil to the belief that it is irredeemable. So there is a lack of parity between Alstonian support for an experientially based belief in God and an experientially based belief in God's nonexistence. Belief in God's nonexistence based on experience of evil does not merit Alstonian support.

Alston himself is not consistent when characterizing doxastic practices. On the one hand, when Alston formally characterizes the notion of a "doxastic practice," as in the

quotations I cited earlier, he fails to include the social nature of a doxastic practice. Insofar as these characterizations go, ways of going from experience to belief need not be socially established. Yet Alston also says that “Doxastic practices are thoroughly social” (Alston 1991, 163). In any event, Alstonian justification should not depend on a doxastic practice being socially established. The reason is this. Alston writes:

The basic point is this. Given that we will inevitably run into epistemic circularity at some point(s) in any attempt to provide direct arguments for the reliability of one or another doxastic practice, we should draw the conclusion that there is no appeal beyond the practices we find firmly established, psychologically or socially. . . . What alternative is there to employing the practices we find ourselves using, to which we find ourselves firmly committed, and which we could abandon or replace only with extreme difficulty if at all? (Alston 1991, 149)

Alston’s argument is that there is no point in abandoning a doxastic practice already engaged in for a competitor no less given to epistemic circularity. Why, he asks, abandon socially well-entrenched practices that we are committed to that we would find difficult to replace, *psychologically* or socially with a competitor no more capable of being shown reliable than ours? Alston’s argument should not depend on social establishment being why there would be difficulty dropping one doxastic practice for another. If difficulty is the problem, then psychological difficulty does as well. I could have a deeply ingrained doxastic practice, private to my tiny group or even to me alone, which I could abandon for a competitor only with extreme psychological difficulty. Hence, I would have no reason to abandon it for a competitor not able to be shown more reliable than my present, personal practice. Alston is quite explicit that the number of people engaging in a doxastic practice does not determine the practical rationality of engaging in it (Alston 1991, 198). I conclude that social establishment is not a requirement for a doxastic practice having Alstonian rationality.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, there are advantages to a widely socially established practice over a personal or small-group one (see Alston 1991, 171). The more participants and the longer over time a practice exists, the greater amount of internal self-consistency can pile up for the practice. The more abundant a track record of self-consistency a practice can show, the greater self-support it enjoys. Proven reliability of this sort is smaller for a small group of practitioners, and poor indeed for a single practitioner. Furthermore, a doxastic practice is adhered to along with other practices, and there is cross-checking between our doxastic practices. The richer the population of adherents, the greater the checks on a doxastic practice from other practices, and the greater the consistency between practices. Another factor that improves self-support is that a richer overrider system accumulates with a richer fund of participants. This helps ensure that the practice is well structured. I conclude that the practical rationality of a doxastic practice does not depend on its being socially established, although it is better, all else being equal, for a doxastic practice to be socially established practice than not.

4 Some will see this as a weakness in Alstonian justification, because quite promiscuous in granting its favors. Here, however, I am not concerned with the acceptability of Alstonian justification, only with whether atheism can merit Alstonian justification. For a critique of mine of Alston on the Christian Mystical Practice, see Gellman (2011).



Still, a doxastic practice need not be socially entrenched to validate believing in God's nonexistence from the experience of evil. In any case, it is not clear that relevant socially established doxastic practices do not exist. These days, there exist associations of "practicing" atheists. These groups do not all have the same emphases, any more than all Christian or Jewish groups do. Yet such groups commonly endorse taking the amount and degree of evil as one basis for denying God's existence. Within such an atheistic practice, a person who undergoes experiences of horrendous evil will be empowered to believe that God does not exist. This practice has a rich overrider system, including the writings of great atheists of the past and present. Given the social entrenchment of such practices and the strong degree of conviction involved, I conclude that a person who engages in such a practice would be Alstonian rational in doing so.

### Alvin Plantinga's Proper Functionalism

Alvin Plantinga gives the following "nutshell" account of his epistemology of proper functionalism:

A belief has warrant for a person S only if that belief is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for S's kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. (Plantinga 2000, 156)

Plantinga has argued that if the God of theism exists, then God would create us so that we would have warranted belief in God. Then we would expect there to be a cognitive faculty for this purpose, answering to Plantinga's requirements for conferring warrant. Such a faculty has been called the *sensus divinitas*. Various experiences properly ground or enhance belief in God through this faculty. These experiences would include perceiving beauty in nature, feeling God's forgiveness, and feeling God speaking to you while reading the Bible. When so formed, the positive epistemic status the proposition God exists has for a person does not depend upon evidence for that proposition, but on the religious experience itself. The belief is grounded nonpropositionally in the experience, and is a properly basic belief.

Plantinga compares experiential nonpropositional grounds for theistic belief to experiential nonpropositional grounds for perceptual, memory, and *a priori* beliefs:

The *sensus divinitas* resembles perception, memory, and *a priori* belief . . . belief about God spontaneously arises in those circumstances, the circumstances that trigger the operation of the *sensus divinitas*. (Plantinga 2000, 175–176)

An experience-to-belief episode guided by the proper functioning of a "Divine Sense," put in us by God, is analogous to perception, memory, and *a priori* beliefs, and has positive epistemic import just as do these other experience-to-belief episodes. So, if God exists, the appropriate experiences warrantably ground our belief in God. The reason not everyone believes in God is that human noetic structures are clouded by sin, causing the *sensus divinitas* to malfunction for the sinner.

Plantinga argues that if God exists, belief in God will be warranted by certain experiences people have, provided by a divine sense. Can we say something analogous about



experiences of evil? Let us try. Suppose God does not exist, but there does exist a bad god, let us call her "Echidna," after the goddess of Greek mythology. Our Echidna is very powerful, knowledgeable, cunning, and bad. She contrives to cause people to suffer by causing them or their loved ones great evils that are devoid of positive redemption. Echidna also contrives to cause people even more suffering by informing them of the sorrowful truth that horrendous evils that visit them have no justification. This adds to their sense of frustration, loss, and despair. Echidna wishes also for people to know that God does not exist, to deprive them of the comforting illusion that the evil they know might still have redemption. Echidna has determined that the world is so wonderfully bad that the worst thing for people would be to have reliable knowledge of just how the world is. So, when creating and designing the world, Echidna creates properly functioning reliable cognitive faculties, including a special cognitive faculty that will function properly (subject to no dysfunction) in an appropriate cognitive environment according to Echidna's design plan that is successfully aimed at the truth that the world contains massive, pointless evil from which will be formed in people the belief that there is no God. People in whom the design plan is working as planned will have warranted beliefs that there is unjustified evil in the world when that belief is triggered by experiences of evil in a way provided for by the design plan. From there, they can get warranted beliefs that God does not exist.

Echidna's design plan is often thwarted, alas, by the analogy of sin in Plantinga's epistemology, that being wishful thinking. The latter infects people's noetic equipment to cause them to create a God-belief that helps them avoid the despair they otherwise would suffer. Echidna acts to disillusion people from this escape, by strengthening their capacity for sensing unjustified evil, and she succeeds in a great number of cases. In many other cases, people with whom Echidna has succeeded keep their true atheistic beliefs secret to themselves, continuing to feign theistic belief in public. Others, however, have sold their soul to the angel of wishful thinking and cannot be reached. Yet there are those who are so willfully convinced that they dare emerge into the light of day as atheists. There are also cases where Echidna simply allows people to remain with their malfunction-caused illusion that God exists when Echidna knows that will be worse for the person than otherwise, which for Echidna is very good.

In this way, experiences of evil *could* have Plantingan warrant. Alas, people do not much believe that Echidna exists and does her dirty tricks, while many people do believe in God. So, we are not going to find many people prepared to believe they have warrant for atheism on such grounds. (Some Satan worshippers might well be attracted by the possibility of having Plantingan warrant for their belief that there is no God!) So, Plantingan warrant will not be a very live option for grounding atheism in this way.

My initial conclusion: On the three views presented, experiences of evil could create positive epistemic import for atheism by analogy with experiences that have positive epistemic import for belief in God's existence. Many presumably do have at least Swinburian or Alstonian support.

Elsewhere, I argue that the earlier three views in favor of positive epistemic import of theistic experiences cover only a narrow range of such experiences.<sup>5</sup> They fail, I argue, to account adequately for the forms of epistemic support emerging from theistic experiences, especially conversion experiences (Gellman, forthcoming). A theistic conversion experience

5 Alas, I count myself among the ones who have had such narrow vision. See Gellman (1997; 2001).

either stands alone or is a culmination of a chain of experiences that produces a first-time belief in God or that sufficiently augments a previous belief in God to profoundly deepen one's belief. To account for epistemic support for theistic conversion experiences, I argue elsewhere, we must recognize that theistic experiences (A) can engender positive propositional attitudes other than belief, namely, *acceptance* and *provisional acceptance*, and, (B) can involve various kinds of mediated support other than propositionally mediated support, prominently that provided by *noetic reconstruction* and *value-attitude reformation*.

Correspondingly, I now offer a proposal for how experiences of evil can create support for acceptance and provisional acceptance of atheism, and for how atheism can gain mediated support from experiences of evil by way of *noetic reconstruction* and *value-attitude reformation*. One important point to emerge will be that experiential support for atheistic belief or acceptance need not be confined to direct support, which is available at the time of the formation of the belief or acceptance. When a person has come to believe or accept a theistic proposition as a result of a theistic experience, and is *presently* warranted in doing so, it does not follow that the person had support or the present degree of support from the very start. The present support could be from mediated support, what the belief or acceptance receives *subsequent* to the initial moment of its formation, support traceable back to the theistic experience.

## Acceptance and Provisional Acceptance

"Acceptance" has been characterized in various ways. I will say that S accepts p when

- (1) S does not have a belief-feeling that p.
- (2) S decides to use p as a premise in theoretical and practical reasoning where this is appropriate, and has a tendency to do so.
- (3) When S considers whether p is the case, S tends to have a positive epistemic attitude toward the truth of p.
- (4) If someone asks S whether p, S will have a tendency to respond affirmatively.
- (5) S will tend to act in ways that would be appropriate if p were the case, given S's goals, aversions, and other propositional attitudes.

(The list is loosely based on Alston 1996. See also Gellman 2007.) Acceptance differs from belief in two ways. When accepting a proposition, a person might be impressed by reasons to think p true but not find herself believing p, just does not have that familiar belief-feeling about p. The reasons to think p true might not be strong enough to generate a belief that p, but strong enough for the person to want to accept that p. Furthermore, one *decides* to accept a proposition, whereas ordinarily one cannot simply decide what to believe.

Provisional acceptance differs from plain acceptance in that with provisional acceptance, a person accepts a proposition to see what will come of it, to see how it will fit with further experience and information. The person has enough of a positive attitude toward the truth of p to accept it provisionally, but not enough simply to make it her own outright. The result of having provisionally accepted a proposition can vary anywhere from later rejection to the fruition of full belief. Provisional acceptance differs from merely adopting a hypothesis in that with the latter, one need not have a positive attitude toward the truth of p, only

wish to test its truth. With provisional acceptance, a person has enough of a positive attitude toward the truth of *p* to make it her own – but only provisionally.

## Noetic Reconstruction

By “noetic reconstruction,” I mean a new, extensive, systematic, modification of a person’s noetic content. This can be from a sudden switch, to “seeing” things in a radical new way, or result from the appearance of deep noetic discontent. Reconstruction can be intentional or something that simply comes over a person, or a mixture of both. Noetic reconstruction affects: (a) propositions currently in one’s noetic structure, and (b) the ways propositions are connected, including deduction, induction, abduction, and causality, or simply the way propositions cohere for any given purpose. The subsequent reconstruction will involve serious realignments of existing propositions, as well as the acquisition of new propositions, some replacing old ones.

An atheistic conversion experience can be the cause of noetic reconstruction by giving rise all at once to a radical ingression into one’s noetic framework so that one sees life and reality in a wholly new way. Alternately, it can cause radical disruption of one’s noetic framework, issuing into noetic discontent that then issues in noetic repair along atheistic lines. Accordingly, the order of the noetic reconstruction and epistemic support of the acquired atheistic belief can take different forms. The order of the mediated support can look like these examples (where “atheistic reconstruction” refers to deeply ingressive noetic reconstruction along atheistic lines, “ $\Rightarrow$ ” means “causes, and “ $\Rightarrow$ ” means “epistemically supports.”):

- (1) Experience of evil  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic noetic reconstruction  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief.
- (2) Experience of evil  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief  $\Rightarrow$  noetic discontent  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic noetic reconstruction  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief.
- (3) Experience of evil  $\Rightarrow$  noetic discontent  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic noetic reconstruction  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief.

In (1), we are to imagine an experience leading to a new, atheistic understanding, with a corresponding new, atheistic noetic complex. Features (see later in the text) of the new atheistic noetic complex will supply mediated support for the belief in God not existing, which belief is embedded in and constitutive of the reconstruction. In (2), the atheistic belief is formed before the noetic reconstruction; however, its epistemic support depends, at least in part, on the success of the subsequent reconstruction in which the belief plays a constitutive role. The belief gets epistemic support when the inevitable noetic discontent follows and produces an emerging atheistic noetic complex that produces noetic gratification. The new atheistic noetic complex supplies support for the atheist belief retroactively. In (3), if the person had hitherto been a theist, for example, then the experience would unhinge her trust in her present noetic structure. She would now see through her previous understandings. Life and the world suddenly lose the meaning she thought they had. Given the noetic discontent and the experience of evil, the person constructs a new understanding along atheistic lines. Features of this new understanding (to be discussed in the next section) will support the belief that God does not exist. In all of this, the power of the experience of evil is what initiates the noetic reconstruction.

## Value-Attitude Reformation

By “value-attitude reformation,” I mean an extensive modification of a person’s attitudinal complexes and behavioral dispositions expressing value orientations, including prominently attitudes about the meaning of life. Value-attitude reformation can result from a sudden “seeing” of things in a radically new way or from the emergence of deep value discontent. The reformation can be intentional or something that happens to a person, or a mixture of both. By partial analogy with what transpires with noetic reconstruction, we get these three versions, where “atheistic value-attitude reformation” refers to a value-attitude reformation deeply informed by an atheistic perspective:

- (1) Experience of evil  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic value-attitude reformation  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief.
- (2) Experience of evil  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief  $\Rightarrow$  value discontent  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic value-attitude reformation  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief.
- (3) Experience of evil  $\Rightarrow$  noetic discontent  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic noetic reconstruction  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief.

In all three, the power of the experience is the source of the support for the atheistic belief.

Inevitably, in a conversion experience to atheism from experience of evil, both noetic reconstruction and value-attitude transformation occur. Inserting the two into one complex process gives us a large number of permutations of how the two can cooperate in getting from an experience of evil to epistemic support for atheistic belief. Here are two examples of such combined mediated support for atheism:

- (1) Experience of evil  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic noetic reconstruction  $\Rightarrow$  value-attitude discontent  $\Rightarrow$  value-attitude reformation  $\Rightarrow$  (atheistic noetic reconstruction + value-attitude reformation)  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief.
- (2) Experience of evil  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic noetic reconstruction  $\Rightarrow$  value-attitude discontent  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic value-attitude reformation  $\Rightarrow$  (atheistic noetic reconstruction + atheistic value-attitude reformation)  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief.

When in place of belief we allow acceptance and provisional acceptance, the possibilities for mediated support multiply. Here is one example, a modification of the example I have just brought:

Experience of evil  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic provisional acceptance  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic noetic reconstruction  $\Rightarrow$  value-attitude discontent  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic value-attitude reformation  $\Rightarrow$  (atheistic noetic reconstruction + atheistic value-attitude reformation)  $\Rightarrow$  atheistic belief).

This scenario tells the story of an initial experience with not enough epistemic wallop to cause a belief-feeling yet possessing sufficient epistemic clout for the subject to decide to accept atheism provisionally. Subsequently, the subject finds sufficient confirmation for his acceptance in the consequent noetic reconstruction and value-attitude reformation so that acceptance turns into belief.

## Why Mediated Support Works

How do atheistic noetic reconstruction and atheistic value-attitude reformation provide mediated support for atheistic belief? Here are some supporting features. I list each separately, although they inevitably interact and commingle, and can be mutually supportive.

### *Support by noetic coherence and comprehensiveness*

In atheistic noetic reconstruction and atheistic value-attitude reformation, atheism becomes embedded as a central organizing principle in a new, impressive noetic structure. The new construction is far more coherent and comprehensive than what was previously in place. The new structure is so convincing in these features that the subject might imagine there could not be a more satisfactory alternative. This noetic constellation now gives better, that is, more coherent and comprehensive, answers, when giving answers, and provides the right questions for going further. It is not a matter only of atheism being coherent, but of atheism being the central force in creating one's personal new, coherent noetic structure. When generated by experience of evil, successful atheistic noetic reconstruction provides a person with a reason for atheism.

### *Support by a changed value-attitude complex*

Experience of horrendous evil can cause a massive collapse in one's complex of value-attitudes, especially if one had been a theist, as my cousin Binyamin, or a Schopenhauerian optimist. Atheistic belief would then gain epistemic support by providing a convincing, appropriate, newly shaped value-attitude complex, one congruent with one's experience. Values-attitudes are deeply felt, pervasive, and convincing and demand a correlative ontology to adequately account for their appropriateness to the world. In this way, value-attitudes could support atheistic belief. Consider when people find certain empirical experiences compelling and yet have no satisfactory ontology to explain their occurrence. It would be justified for them to make new ontological assumptions for the sake of explanation. This is one way in which science advances. Similarly, a person could acquire a value-attitude complex profoundly compelling, yet not have an ontology to explain what makes it suited to reality. By analogy to compelling empirical experiences, making new ontological assumptions would be warranted for a satisfactory explanation for why certain value-attitudes are the right ones. (A somewhat similar line of argument, one for "telic" justification, has been made by Fleischacker 2011.)

When thrown by an atheistic conversion experience into a convincing value-attitude transformation, that belief in God's nonexistence will make the best sense of newly emerging, profoundly felt values, counts in favor of the truth of that belief. When one finds others of the same mind, the value-explaining power of atheism is enhanced.

### *Superior epistemic vantage point*

Before an atheistic conversion experience of evil, a person had experienced the world and herself differently, perhaps religiously or agnostically. In a conversion experience from evil, one *sees through* one's previous world outlook. A *seeing-through* experience provides an

epistemic reason for acquiescing in what one now sees. The relationship between the old view and the new atheistic one can be compared with the change of appearance of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel after its restoration in the 1990s. Before restoration, the Sistine Chapel's paintings were covered in grime and soot and blurred by water damage. Paintings had been partly painted over, in misguided attempts to restore what people thought must be there underneath. Just so, an atheistic conversion experience of evil can grant one a sense that one's previous view had been like looking at life *unknowingly* through soot and grime, and had suffered from flawed attempts to present what then could not be seen clearly. From an atheistic conversion experience of evil one can well understand why religious folk might *think* they are seeing properly and understand why they continue to fail to see what now one sees properly. Religious folk think they are seeing what is there, so to speak, but only see through an interfering medium, layers of acculturation and wishful thinking. It is as though one has experienced a Sistine Chapel restored. Perceiving atheism in this way as the result of experience of evil provides a degree of support for one's atheistic belief.

To use another analogy, a person in an atheist conversion experience of evil could be warranted in seeing herself as having become something of an "expert" and therefore in a superior epistemic position relative to novices. That novices do not see what she sees when observing a Cloud Chamber is not a defeater for what a particle physicist sees. The latter, after all, is an expert, and her expertise justifies her believing she sees what is not accessible to others. She sees something deeper in the visible misty tracks of the chamber, recognizing particles passing through the chamber's medium. In the same way, it is not solely noetic and attitudinal coherence and explanatory power that are relevant to the support of atheism in an atheist conversion experience. The experience brings with it a perspective newly granted of now being in a superior epistemic position than previously because from now on, one can see what others ordinarily do not see. This counts in favor of the atheist belief generated by the experience of evil. When one can identify other "experts" concerning experiences of evil, one's conviction is justifiably solidified.

Typically, the two ingredients of (1) one's atheistic coherence and comprehensiveness contrasted with what went before, and (2) a convincing value orientation, will interact in a spiraling process of mutual nourishment and support. Evolving value reformation will nourish and support noetic reconstruction, which, as the latter evolves will add reason for continuing evolvment of value reformation, and so on.

I return to Arthur Schopenhauer and my cousin Binyamin. Schopenhauer's hypothetical tourist who visits localities where she experiences horrendous evil was, by hypothesis, an optimist about life. Perhaps she believed what William James once described as the optimistic religious outlook, that, "The best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word" (James 1956, 25). Her new belief that God does not exist, supposing Schopenhauer's plan to succeed, might be directly supported by her experiences or else be supported by propositional mediation. More likely, I submit, would be conversion by other mediated support. Experiences of horrendous evil will break down her attitudinal structure of optimism and trust, creating the belief that God does not exist as the best way of understanding the world and one's life, given her new set of value-attitudes. Or, the conversion could come from the experience of evil causing an extensive reshaping of her noetic complex.

My cousin Binyamin might have lost his belief in God by his experiences of horrendous evil by direct support of his experiences or by propositionally mediated support. That is

to say, he could have lost his faith by *seeing* right there in the evil that the world was Godless or that the evil was so repugnant as to be irredeemable. This would not be unlike the poet William Blake writing about *seeing* a heaven in a wild flower or ordinary mortals who *see* God's handiwork in the beauty and symmetry of a snowflake. Yet at least as plausible would be that Binyamin could no longer endorse his old value-attitudes that were proper for *God's world*. Binyamin's value-attitude structure that had been appropriate to God's world could no longer fit reality. He had to give up his belief in God to make sense of his value crisis and to reform his value-attitude complex to newly appropriate contours. The depth of Binyamin's conviction might best be accounted for in this way together with noetic restructuring that came as a result of the value collapse and repositioning. Binyamin expressed to me a desire to pray. This was a nostalgic memory of his old life, which had still attractive features for him. However, he can no longer see the life and the world in a manner that would make living that way appropriate. Binyamin's experiences of horrendous evils would support his atheism in a mediated way, by value reformation and noetic reconstruction.

My conclusion is that belief (or acceptance) that God does not exist need not gain support from experiences of horrendous evil by an argument or by direct or by propositionally mediated support. Atheism can gain positive epistemic support from rich, complex mediated support emerging from experiences of evil, support arising only *after* an initial belief formation or acceptance decision. Whether such support is sufficient to warrant atheism *all things considered* is a different matter altogether. I do not think so, but will not argue that here.

## Acknowledgments

I am indebted to two anonymous readers who gave very good criticisms of an earlier draft of this chapter. Jonathan Malino provided important corrections and challenges whose performance continues to rank him as a reader than which none better can be conceived.

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# The Problem of Animal Pain and Suffering

ROBERT FRANCESCOTTI

We recall Rowe's (1979, 337) fawn, trapped in a forest fire, "horribly burned," and lying "in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering" (see Chapter 4 of this volume). Not all nonhuman animal distress is quite so severe. Yet much of that which does exist seems severe enough to count as genuine suffering, and the amount of animal suffering would appear to be quite vast. As Dawkins describes,

During the minute it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive; others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear; others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites; thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease. (Dawkins 1995, 132)

The evolutionary machinery of natural selection that currently causes much animal pain and suffering no doubt had done so long before humans appeared on the scene – with the first mammals predating *Homo sapiens* for over 200 million years, and the first vertebrates appearing during the Cambrian period more than 500 million years ago. We seem to have, as Darwin describes, "the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time"<sup>1</sup> – cruel works of nature indeed!<sup>2</sup>

The fact that so much animal suffering occurred prior to humans is especially threatening to the belief that an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good god exists. It is arguable that for the sake of free will, an all-good creator would allow the animal suffering caused by human activities (e.g., factory farming, hunting, and medical research). Other instances of animal suffering that we observe might be allowed to help build our moral character (see Chapter 14). These explanations, however, do not account for those instances of animal suffering we clearly did not cause or observe – which obviously includes the countless cases of prehuman animal suffering.

1 *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin* (Darwin 1958, 90).

2 Recall Darwin's famous "devil's chaplain" remark in his letter to Hooker on July 13, 1856.

In this chapter, I discuss some attempts to respond to the evil of animal suffering in defense of the belief that an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good god (hereafter “God”) exists, and I pay special attention to Michael Murray’s (2008) compelling discussion in *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw*. Murray offers a comprehensive survey of possible responses to the problem of animal suffering. He concludes that there are some successful responses available and therefore animal suffering does not undermine the belief that God exists. In what follows, I argue that the responses Murray finds successful are not adequate. I conclude that the problem of evil based on animal suffering remains a serious threat.<sup>3</sup>

## Neo-Cartesian Defenses

One might think that nonhuman animal distress is no serious threat to the belief that God exists for the simple reason that other animals are incapable of genuine suffering. One who takes this line of defense does not have to endorse immaterial mental substances and might even grant that some other animals possess certain types of consciousness. So the line of response that denies animal suffering can be *neo*-Cartesian.

Murray describes four neo-Cartesian views. The first is:

1. Many nonhuman creatures are conscious inasmuch as they are alive, awake, and have sensations. . . . Yet, unlike the sensory states possessed by humans, the mechanisms whereby these organisms have access to the world lack any phenomenal character whatsoever. There is an intrinsic difference between the sensory states of nonhumans and humans in this phenomenal respect. (Murray 2008, 53–54)

Merely being awake, alert, and perceptually aware of one’s environment does not entail that one’s mental states are conscious in the *phenomenal* sense.<sup>4</sup> Phenomenal consciousness involves more than just an awareness of one’s surroundings. It consists in the presence of qualitative mental states, “qualia,” which give our experience the “what it is like” character that Nagel (1974) famously highlights. It would seem that phenomenal consciousness is the type of consciousness most relevant to the problem of evil. The phenomenal character of pain is the way pain *feels* to the one who has it, and it is precisely the way it feels to the individual that makes pain *undesirable* from the individual’s point of view. So it is arguable that without phenomenal consciousness, an organism does not have the *distressful* states that would motivate an argument from evil. Now, on proposal 1, since all nonhuman animals lack phenomenal consciousness, none can experience the *feel* of pain; so their “pain” states do not qualify as distressful.

3 Murray (2008, 37) reserves the term “defense” for responses to the *logical* argument from evil. I shall follow van Inwagen (2006, 66–7) and use “defense” to include responses to the problem of evil in its evidential form. These “defenses” are not theodicies; by “theodicy,” van Inwagen (2006, 65) and Murray have in mind explanations that are offered as known truths. Rather, these are possible explanations, which for all we know might be true. Murray borrows a Latin phrase from Leibniz – “*causa dei*” (“CD” for short) – to designate those explanations of evil that are responses to evidential arguments without being theodicies.

4 When we say that someone is alert, we usually mean that she is aware of what is happening in her surroundings, which is what Armstrong (1981) calls “perceptual” consciousness. Being alert would also seem to require what Block (1995) calls “access” consciousness, where one’s mental states (and their contents) are available for use in guiding one’s behavior.

According to 1, whether a mental state is phenomenally conscious is an *intrinsic* feature of that state. However, on the *Higher-Order Thought* (HOT) view, being phenomenally conscious is an extrinsic feature of a mental state; a mental state is phenomenally conscious, on this view, just in case it is the object of a suitable higher-order thought, for example, an assertoric thought that one has that mental state.<sup>5</sup> The range of animals we are inclined to believe have thoughts about their own (or anyone else's) mental states would seem to be far more restricted than the range of animals we are inclined to think feel pain. So the HOT view might lead one to believe that far fewer animals experience phenomenal pain than we are initially inclined to think. Carruthers (1989), for example, is notorious for showing with a version of the HOT view that other animals (perhaps with the exception of certain other primates) lack phenomenal consciousness. This position inspires the second neo-Cartesian view that Murray describes:

2. For a mental state to be a conscious state (phenomenally) requires an accompanying higher-order mental state (a HOT) that one has that state as its intentional object. . . . Only humans have the cognitive faculties required to form the conception of themselves being in a first-order state that one must have in order to have a HOT. (Murray 2008, 55)

Suppose one rejects the HOT view, believing instead that a mental state can be phenomenally conscious even without an accompanying HOT. According to Murray, one can still appeal to HOTs to respond to the problem of animal suffering by endorsing either of the following two proposals:

3. Some nonhuman creatures have states that have intrinsic phenomenal qualities analogous to those possessed by humans when they are in states of pain. These creatures lack, however, any higher-order states of being aware of themselves as being in first-order states. (Murray 2008, 55)

4. Most nonhuman animals lack the cognitive faculties required to be in a higher-order state of recognizing themselves to be in a first-order state of pain. Those that can on occasion achieve a second-order access to their first-order states of pain nonetheless do not have the capacity to regard that second-order state as undesirable. (Murray 2008, 57)

Unlike 2, proposals 3 and 4 do not rely on the idea that being phenomenally conscious requires an accompanying HOT, and unlike 3, 4 allows that some nonhuman animals have HOTs. However, both 3 and 4 deny that other animals have the HOTs required for genuinely distressful states, genuine *suffering* on the part of the animal.

Actually, it is not clear that position 3 is even coherent. We are to imagine that some other animals have mental states with "intrinsic phenomenal qualities analogous to those possessed by humans," but they are not aware of being in those states, and so, Murray explains, "there is simply no victim or subject for whom it can be said that there is a way it is like for it to be in such a state of pain" (Murray 2008, 56). However, if these states are phenomenally similar to those we have, as 3 claims, then there would be a "what it is like" character to these states, and in particular, they would have something similar to the

5 In addition to being assertoric, Rosenthal (1986) requires that the HOT is an occurrent thought, roughly contemporaneous with the conscious state, and not mediated by inference or perception.

distressful feel of our pain states. So there would be a clear sense in which some other animals suffer.

Unlike 3, 4 does not imply that the pain states of other animals are phenomenally like ours. According to 4, the first-order states of other animals might have *some* phenomenal character, and some of these animals might also have HOTs, but none of them have the sort of HOTs required to make their states phenomenally distressful. Murray appeals to the classic dual-system model of human pain to make sense of how 4 might be true. It is widely accepted that pain perception involves two distinct subsystems – the sensory discriminative and the affective-motivational subsystems. After synapsing in the dorsal horn of the spinal cord, neurons in former stream have axons that terminate in the thalamus, and there connect with neurons that project to the somatosensory cortex. This neural processing computes the nature of the stimulus (e.g., stabbing, burning, and prickling) and its location, intensity, and duration. Neurons in the affective-motivational subsystem, after synapsing in the thalamus, project to multiple cortical areas, including the anterior cingulate gyrus, insula, and prefrontal cortex, each of which play a role in our emotional responses to pain perception.

One way in which 4 might be true, Murray speculates, is that some nonhuman animals have the sensory discriminative pathway, thereby having some awareness of their pain (some HOTs), but they lack the affective-motivational pathway, and therefore lack the HOTs necessary for genuine distress. The situation, he suggests, might be similar to the way in which lobotomized patients report that they sense pain without being especially bothered by it. Of course, unlike lobotomized patients, other animals do seem to be greatly distressed by their pain and they are highly motivated to be rid of it. But, Murray proposes, it might be that with the help of other neural mechanisms (mechanisms other than an affective-motivational system), nonhuman animals are able to exhibit robust avoidance behavior without the undesirable phenomenal character typically associated with pain in humans. Murray is not claiming that this, or any other version of 4, is true. He is also not endorsing any of 1–3. The point, instead, is that there is not enough scientific evidence to show that these neo-Cartesian accounts are false. So, Murray claims, one can appeal to any of 1–4 as a potentially effective response to an argument against the existence of God based on the evil of animal pain and suffering.

To qualify as an effective response, it is not enough that the account one offers is *logically compatible* with God's existence, for this compatibility has little weight against an *evidential* version of the argument from evil. On the other hand, it is too much to require that one *knows* that the defense is true. Answering an evidential argument from evil requires nothing more than casting sufficient doubt on the claim that the evil renders God's existence unlikely. One can do that with a reasonable explanation of how the claim (that the evil makes God's existence unlikely) might be false, without knowing that the explanation offered is true (see Chapters 27 and 28). As a middle way between these extremes of logical compatibility and known truth, Murray (2008, 39) proposes that "to deflect the evidential worries raised by evil," one needs to provide an explanation "which she is not justified or warranted in rejecting in light of the claims she justifiably accepts". The neo-Cartesian accounts, Murray contends, "at least live up to this minimal challenge" (72).

In the next section, I show on the contrary that 1–4 do not satisfy Murray's standard, and that even if they did, they would still be inadequate responses to the problem of animal suffering.

## Why the Neo-Cartesian Defenses Fail

According to Murray's standard of adequacy, a successful explanation of some apparent evil is one that we are not warranted in rejecting given our justified acceptances. Of course, whether one is justified in holding a certain belief depends on the evidence available to the individual. A thirteenth-century peasant might have many justified beliefs that would be highly unjustified if held by a twenty-first-century college graduate. Murray's target audience includes individuals more similar to the latter, an audience reasonably knowledgeable about matters of the sort discussed in his work. That is why he seeks explanations that "do not stand in tension with most of . . . a common set of justified acceptances endorsed by individuals who are reasonably well-educated in matters of contemporary philosophy and science" (2008, 39). However, it is doubtful that his neo-Cartesian defenses meet this condition.

(a) Note, first, that there is a justified acceptance of most members of Murray's well-educated target group that is in tension with the neo-Cartesian accounts. The vast majority of those well-educated in contemporary philosophy and science certainly do believe that *some nonhuman animals experience phenomenal pain and suffering*. It is also quite clear that given the available evidence, this belief is justified.

I think it is safe to say that the majority of well-educated individuals believe that not just a few, but *many* nonhuman species experience phenomenal pain. This belief, too, seems highly justified. Casual observation of animal behavior makes it quite tempting to believe that many other animals have genuine pain sensations that are undesirable from the animal's point of view. Nociception is the registering of information in the nervous system about tissue damage, and it is well-known that nociception often produces mere reflex behavior, not requiring any phenomenal consciousness; for example, vocal reactions, bodily contortions, and rapid limb withdrawals are reflex movements in many cases, even for humans. At the same time, we know that there is a lot of readily observable nonreflex pain behavior found in many species. *Pain guarding* (limping, standing on one leg, or otherwise favoring the damaged area), which continues for some time after the damaging stimulus has ceased, is evidence of phenomenal pain in other animals. *Grooming* the damaged area is further evidence, and *learning* to avoid a source of pain, which is often observed, is certainly a strong indication that the animal has experienced a phenomenally distressful state.<sup>6</sup>

Experimental observations make the case for phenomenal pain in other animals even more convincing. Especially telling are experiments revealing the *effects of analgesics* on pain behavior. Colpaert *et al.* (2001) showed that rats with arthritis will drink water containing fentanyl instead of a sweet solution that control rats prefer, which suggests that the rats drink the water with the analgesic to relieve distressful sensations caused by their arthritis. Elwood and Appel (2009) observed that some hermit crabs evacuated their shells upon receiving electric shocks, and of those who did, fewer evacuated a preferred species of shell. The other shocked crabs who did not initially evacuate, exchanged their shells for new ones when subsequently given the opportunity to do so at a much higher rate than those crabs who were not shocked. Stevens *et al.* (2001) have shown that administering

6 By "learning" I am not here including mere reflex conditioning, and certainly not the conditioned responses caused by spinal activity alone (e.g., see Hook and Grau 2007).

nonopioid analgesics to northern grass frogs reduces behavioral responses to noxious stimuli applied to their skin, and Sneddon (2003) observed that when a noxious chemical is applied to the lips of rainbow trout, they exhibit certain nonreflex pain-related behavior (e.g., rubbing their lips into the gravel and against the sides of the tank), and that this behavior is reduced after administering morphine. Behavioral data such as these justify the belief that some, indeed many, species other than our own experience phenomenal pain. (The worry that nonmammals lack the neocortical areas involved in mammalian pain perception is addressed in (b).)

Note also that even if some version of the HOT theory is correct, there is still good reason to believe that many nonhuman animals feel pain. The neo-Cartesian accounts Murray describes imply that the requisite HOTs are more cognitively sophisticated than what other animals can manage. However, as Gennaro (2004) points out, nothing about the nature of a HOT in general, and nothing about a HOT of the sort that yields phenomenal consciousness, requires that its content is especially sophisticated. The requisite HOTs will need to make some reference to the mental states they render conscious, and the content of the HOTs must represent those states as states of oneself. But there is no reason to suppose that to render a mental state conscious, a HOT needs to represent its object as a *conscious* state or even as a *mental* state. It is arguable that the bearer of the HOT need not have the concept of either consciousness or mentality. It is also doubtful that a robust representation of a *self* persisting through time is required. So even on the controversial assumption that the HOT theory of consciousness is true, the idea that all nonhuman animals lack phenomenal pain/suffering is still highly implausible. It is implausible enough, it seems, that the neo-Cartesian accounts would still conflict with a justified acceptance of most of those in Murray's target group – the belief that some nonhuman animals experience pain/suffering. (Note, also, that the intuitions that lead one to endorse the HOT theory might be equally satisfied by a *perceptual model* of consciousness, which requires only that the conscious state is the object of some *higher-order awareness*, analogous to the awareness that ordinary perception provides.<sup>7</sup> On this view, the higher-order perceptual states that render their objects conscious need have no more conceptual sophistication than the perceptual states with which animals are aware of their environments.)

(b) The conflict with justified acceptances mentioned in (a) would not be bad news for the neo-Cartesian defenses if Murray's criterion for an acceptable defense were somehow too stringent, for in that case there is the possibility that the neo-Cartesian defenses are adequate on some more suitable criterion. Unfortunately, it seems that Murray's standard is actually far too lax. An evidential argument from evil purports to show that the presence of evil makes it unlikely that an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God exists. For a defense D to count as a successful response to such an argument, it is too much to require that we *know* that D is true. On the other hand, it seems that more is required than that D is consistent with one's justified acceptances. Our justified acceptances, even if consistent with D, might render it very likely to be false, and if D is highly unlikely given our justified acceptances, then it does little to weaken the force of an evidential argument from evil.

We might require, as Tooley (2010, section 4) suggests, that the story offered is one that is *likely to be true*. But this might be too much to demand. Suppose someone contends that the existence of evil *e* makes it likely that God does not exist. If the chance of defense D's

<sup>7</sup> See Armstrong (1981) and Lycan (1987).

being true is 45%, then while D is not likely to be true, given that its truth is just barely unlikely, it would seem somewhat misleading to say that *e* makes God's existence unlikely. So it is arguable in this case that D qualifies as an adequate defense even though it is a bit more likely to be false than true. Perhaps what we should say is that D is an adequate defense just in case D is *not significantly likely to be false*.

Saying that D is not significantly likely to be false is certainly vague, but I think it is clear enough to show the inadequacy of Murray's neo-Cartesian defenses. The behavioral evidence of phenomenal pain in other mammals, along with the great neural similarities between the different species of mammal, including the presence of the anterior cingulate gyrus and prefrontal cortex in all mammalian species, makes it very probable that mammals in general experience phenomenal pain.

While other vertebrates lack a frontal cortex (of the sort found in mammals<sup>8</sup>), it would be a mistake to infer from this that they lack phenomenal pain. For if some version of *functionalism* is correct, then whether an inner event instantiates a mental property, and if so which mental property it instantiates, depends on the functional role it plays (especially, how the event mediates between environmental input, behavioral output, and other mental events). If what gives an event its mental status is the functional role it plays, then events that differ biologically, chemically, or physically can instantiate the same mental property by playing the same functional role. It follows that if functionalism is correct, then the lack of brain structures responsible for phenomenal pain in mammals is no reason to deny the capacity for phenomenal pain in other vertebrates. Actually, there is reason to think that some nonmammals do have brain structures functionally equivalent to those responsible for phenomenal pain in humans and other mammals. The evidence that a brain process plays the functional role characteristic of some mental state is largely behavioral, and as noted earlier, the behavioral evidence is strongly suggestive of phenomenal pain in at least some vertebrates other than mammals. In fact, there is some research showing similarities between the dorsolateral forebrain in pigeons and our prefrontal cortex.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, even if the *type-identity theory* were true (according to which mental states are type-identical with brain states), the absence of frontal cortex would still not entail the lack of phenomenal pain, for some nonmammalian vertebrates might experience a brand of pain that is just as distressful as what we or other mammals experience but of a somewhat different phenomenal type. (Also, as noted in (c) which follows shortly, some nonmammals might experience phenomenally distressful states other than pain.)

DeGrazia (1996, 111) claims that "given the convergence of various kinds of evidence, it is parsimonious to attribute pain, and consciousness generally, to most or all vertebrate species and probably at least some invertebrates such as cephalopods." And Varner (1998, 54) notes that the consensus is that the most obvious divide where conscious pain is concerned is that between vertebrates and invertebrates. A slightly more reserved assessment is that given the evidence at our disposal, it is highly likely that mammals in general experience phenomenal pain, pain that is genuinely distressful to the animal, and there is reason to think that some nonmammals do so as well even though it is quite unclear where exactly to draw the line.<sup>10</sup> On this verdict, it is highly likely that many animals other than humans

8 This qualification allows for analogous brain structures in other vertebrates (e.g., found in birds).

9 See, for example, Mogensen and Divac (1982) and Güntürkün (2005).

10 See Allen's (2004) cautious discussion of the evidence for animal pain.



experience phenomenally distressful pain states, and it is wildly implausible, given the evidence available, that only humans possess such states. So if an adequate response to an evidential argument from evil is one that is not significantly likely to be false, then each of Murray's neo-Cartesian defenses fails.

It might be argued that in my objections, I have not paid enough attention to the difference between phenomenal *pain* and genuine *suffering*, a distinction on which both 3 and 4 rely. Granted, the pain of a minor paper cut does not qualify as genuine suffering. Still, it is not clear why sufficiently intense phenomenal pain should not count. There is emotional suffering, which is especially undesirable, and it might be that many vertebrates are incapable of that. But Rowe's blazing fawn, even if not experiencing emotional anguish, is certainly undergoing extreme suffering. And, of course, there is a great range of phenomenal intensity between a minor cut and being burned alive, much of which is phenomenally strong enough to count as suffering to some significant degree (and to some morally salient degree).<sup>11,12</sup>

(c) So the neo-Cartesian defenses do not satisfy Murray's standard of not conflicting with one's justified acceptances, and it seems they also fail to meet the standard of not being significantly likely to be false. Another reason for rejecting the neo-Cartesian defenses (a point related to the issue of emotional suffering) is that these accounts focus only on the distress of *pain* while it is clear that there are phenomenally distressful mental states other than pain. Two obvious candidates are *depression* and *grief*, forms of emotional suffering, which appear to be present in other mammals (seen especially in behavior exhibited at the death of kin<sup>13</sup>). *Fear* is another source of phenomenal distress and it is arguably more widely distributed than depression, grief, and even phenomenal pain. Grandin and Deesing (2003) indicate that unlike the awareness of pain, fear is processed in a subcortical region, the amygdala, which is present in all vertebrates. Of course, one might argue that the fear experienced by nonmammalian vertebrates is not *phenomenally* distressful, that it does not *feel* distressful to its host. Whether this is true remains to be decided by further scientific study. But the point remains: the probability that other animals, including many nonmammalian vertebrates, experience phenomenally distressful mental states of some sort or other is greater than the already high probability that they experience phenomenally distressful pain states.

(d) There is another, very different sort of problem with the neo-Cartesian defenses. One way to defend the belief in God against the problem of animal suffering is to (i) acknowledge that animal suffering exists while trying to show how its existence might be justified. Another way is to simply (ii) deny that it exists. The neo-Cartesian accounts are type-ii defenses. As Murray notes, "[n]eo-Cartesian explanations of animal pain and suffering differ from the other explanations" defended in his book "since they deny rather than explain their reality" (71).

11 It is arguable that HOTs are not required for nonemotional phenomenal distress, for it seems that a mental state can *feel* a certain way to one without one having thoughts about the mental state; also remember how minimal in content the HOT would need to be even if it were required.

12 Tye (1997, 310) contends that even honey bees experience phenomenal pain, but adds that "they never *suffer*" since "[s]uffering requires the cognitive awareness of pain." In support of this claim, Tye remarks that one "who has a bad headache and who is distracted for a moment or two does not suffer at that time" (310). Perhaps we should say, instead, either that the suffering still occurs at the time but one is distracted from it or that during the moments of distraction, the headache is not phenomenally conscious.

13 See the examples described by Bekoff (2007, 62–70).



Given the difference in approach between type-i and type-ii defenses, one should not be surprised if the standards of adequacy also differ. Recall the standard of *not being significantly likely to be false*. Even if this is an acceptable criterion for type-i defenses, it does not seem appropriate for the type-ii variety. Consider the following statement, S: *nonhuman animals do not suffer*. While it is hard to deny the wealth of evidence against S, let us suppose the evidence available does not make S as unlikely as one would think – only slightly more likely to be false than true, suppose. In that case, S meets the condition of not being significantly likely to be false. However, S's meeting this condition should not satisfy the theist. One would like one's belief that God exists to be justified not just in the event that the apparent suffering is only apparent. One would like one's theism to be justified in the event that what appears to be animal suffering actually does qualify as suffering. After all, even if there were room for doubt regarding S given the available evidence, overwhelming evidence that S is false might be just around the corner. The theist would not want her belief to suddenly become unjustified in that case. It seems, then, that to make a convincing case against the argument from the evil of animal suffering, rather than showing that there is reason to be suspicious of its occurrence (a type-ii defense), one should explain why God would allow it on the plausible assumption that it is more than just apparent (a type-i defense).

The points raised in (a)–(d) show that the neo-Cartesian responses are far from adequate. In fact, Murray acknowledges “that few will find the neo-Cartesian position to be compelling or even believable,” (71), which is why he goes on to describe various type-i accounts. In the short space remaining, I briefly comment on the most promising of these.

## Nomic Regularity and the Progression from Chaos to Order

Suppose the theist concedes that many nonhuman animals experience phenomenal pain and suffering. Also suppose that unlike the young-universe creationists, she accepts the evidence indicating that other animals predated humans for millions of years. Such a theist might respond to the problem of animal suffering with the popular appeal to *nomic regularity* (NR). The proposal is that the evil of prehuman animal suffering is a necessary by-product of a physical universe that operates in a law-like manner. What outweighing good requires the universe to operate in a law-like manner? Murray explains that to affect the world as a result of our free choices, “we must be able to form intentions to bring about states in the world, and we must have reason to believe that by undertaking certain bodily movements we make it likely that those states of the world will come about.” This free and effective choice would not be possible if the world were not nomically regular, for in that case, “we would never have seen any correlation between what we will to happen in the world and what does happen in the world” (Murray 2008, 139–40).

So free and effective human choice requires NR. But NR comes at a price. The natural laws that allow us to believe that our actions will achieve our goals also present us with conditions that produce pain and suffering. Nonhuman distress also seems to be a necessary by-product of NR. As van Inwagen (2006, 115) reports, a world in which nonhuman animals “felt no pain would be on that account alone massively irregular.” We are to imagine that “fawns are . . . saved by angels when they are in danger of being burnt alive. . . . Lambs are miraculously hidden from lions, and the lions are compensated for the resulting restriction on their diets by physically impossible falls of high-protein manna.” While NR explains

animal suffering in terms of free will, the focus here is not on the consequences of our free choices, but on the *antecedent* conditions necessary for free will. The claim is that NR is a necessary antecedent condition for free and effective human choice, and the natural laws it entails give rise to animal as well as human suffering.<sup>14</sup>

This explanation of animal suffering does raise some difficult questions. Free and effective human choice is a goal of NR; there might also be other benefits for humans, for example, the intellectual satisfaction of contemplating the natural order. But one wonders: why did there have to be so much animal suffering *before humans appeared on the scene*? Why wasn't NR established only after humans came along? Granted, NR is of value to other animals as well for without it their environments would not be constant enough for them to survive for long. However, Murray (2008, 152) notes that God could have made it the case that NR existed all along, with all animals satisfying one of the neo-Cartesian accounts before humans evolved, thereby saving them from the painful conditions and suffering that NR brings. So why didn't God simply make it the case that prehuman animals were incapable of pain and suffering?

To answer these questions, Murray appeals to a *progression of the universe from chaos to order*. The proposal is that the universe began with chaos, and given NR, it was able to reach its current state only through increasing orders of complexity, which includes increasing orders of organismic complexity. For this progression to be achieved in a nomically regular fashion, the increased complexity of organisms would seem to require that some of our evolutionary ancestors had a degree of complexity that approximates our own. And this would seem to demand that some of our immediate ancestors were physically complex enough to have a rich store of mental capacities, including the capacity for pain and suffering. So the progression of the universe from chaos to order (following Murray, "CTO" for short) added to NR is what requires the prehuman animal suffering that actually did occur. This is an explanation of animal suffering, Murray argues, that we are not warranted in rejecting given our justified acceptances.

The NR + CTO defense attempts to explain how the evil of animal suffering is justified and it does so by offering what Murray calls a "morally sufficient reason." As Murray describes, offering a morally sufficient reason for some evil, E, requires giving an account of E that meets the *Necessity*, *Outweighing*, and *Rights Conditions*. The account of why E obtains should be one according to which the good secured by E "could not have been secured without permitting either E or some other evils morally equivalent to or worse than E," the good secured by the permission of E "is sufficiently outweighing," and "it is within the rights of the one permitting the evil to permit it" (14). So as an explanation of how the evil of animal suffering might be justified, the NR + CTO defense should be viewed as a story according to which:

- (A) The good achieved by NR and CTO requires as much evil as the evil of animal suffering.
- (B) The good achieved by NR and CTO outweighs the evil of animal suffering.
- (C) It is within the rights of God to permit the evil of animal suffering.

14 These "antecedent" (as opposed to "consequent") free-will theodicies/defenses tell us "that there are certain antecedent conditions which are requisite for free beings to be able to exercise their freedom and that such conditions may incidentally lead to certain other evil states of affairs" (Murray 1993, 29).

It does seem that as a response to the problem of evil, we would expect a story on which the Necessity, Outweighing, and Rights Conditions are met. So it seems that whether the defense is successful depends on how plausible or implausible it is to think that these conditions are met. In particular, whether the NR + CTO defense is successful depends on how plausible or implausible conditions A–C are. So on Murray's standard of adequacy, the NR + CTO defense will count as an adequate explanation only if A–C are claims we are *not warranted in rejecting given our justified acceptances*. And with the standard of adequacy that I proposed earlier, the NR + CTO defense is successful only if A–C are *not significantly likely to be false*.<sup>15</sup>

Outweighing Condition B is dubious. Recall that CTO is added to NR to help explain the existence of *prehuman* animal suffering. NR has the benefit of allowing free and effective human choice as well as the value of providing other animals sufficiently stable environments so that they might survive. But these benefits do not require that animals experienced pain and suffering before humans came along. For this reason, CTO was mentioned. The appeal to CTO requires that our complexity arose only by way of the complexity of our ancestors, some of which were physically sophisticated enough to experience pain and suffering. However, for this appeal to CTO to be successful, CTO needs to secure goods beyond the value of NR.

While one might focus on the various instrumental values of CTO (e.g., the universe exhibiting progress, or having narrative structure, or keeping God appropriately hidden), Murray (168–180) shows the limitations of these appeals and proposes instead that CTO is an *intrinsic* good – the idea being that a universe “designed as a machine-making machine is a greater reflection of divine majesty than is the creation of the finished product” (183). It is not clear why being a reflection of divine majesty should be considered an *intrinsic* value of CTO since x's being a reflection of y is not an intrinsic property of x if x (CTO) is distinct from y (divine majesty). Nevertheless, in the short space remaining, I will grant the Outweighing Condition and the Rights Condition for the sake of argument and focus instead on Necessity Condition A.<sup>16</sup>

There certainly are reasons to think that Necessity Condition A is unlikely. One reason is the plausible belief that the laws of nature are metaphysically contingent, that is, that

15 To accept the Necessity Condition is to deny that God might allow *gratuitous* evil. While it does seem that gratuitous evil would not be allowed by an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God, van Inwagen (1995, 77) disagrees with the help of an argument by analogy: “there is no morally decisive reason to prefer a jail term of ten years as a penalty for armed assault to a term of ten years a day, despite the indubitable facts that these two penalties would have the same deterrent effect and that one is lighter than the other.” Likewise, van Inwagen concludes, in some circumstances, it would be acceptable for God to allow  $n + 1$  units of evil when  $n$  would be enough to achieve all the benefits that result. However, there is a crucial disanalogy here. There is the obvious problem of any human knowing exactly how many days of punishment is required in any given case to achieve the desired good along with the practical and ethical worries of passing out different sentences for different instances of the same crime given the epistemic limitations. For God, there are no such epistemic limitations.

There is also Engel's (2009, footnote 6) point that even if it were permissible for God to allow some minimal amount of gratuitous evil, it would not be permissible for God to allow *excessive* amounts of gratuitous evil, and it is quite arguable that excessive amounts of gratuitous animal suffering do exist. So in deciding the plausibility of Necessity Condition A, we should consider the amount of gratuitous evil allowed by the NR and CTO that actually obtains.

16 In deciding the plausibility of the Rights Condition, C, we should keep in mind Smith's (1991, 169) remark that “[n]o omnibenevolent creator would use animals as a mere means to the end of human welfare, treating them as if they had no value or rights by themselves and could be tortured with complacency on a mass scale for the sake of ‘spiritual benefits’ to the human species.”

some other metaphysically possible worlds have somewhat different laws of nature. It seems that God could have created a world with different physical, chemical, and biological laws. It also seems that the *psychophysical* laws (the laws linking mental properties to lower-level properties) could have differed in some respects. But if the laws of nature are contingent, then even with the same initial conditions, the NR and CTO that actually did obtain could have been at least a bit different – a somewhat different nomically regular progression from chaos to order.

Granted, it is a matter of controversy whether the actual laws of nature could have failed to obtain (e.g., one might think otherwise with a causal account of property individuation). However, even if the laws of nature are metaphysically necessary, A is still quite dubious. For even with the same laws, the nomically regular progression from chaos to order might have been different. This would require only that the initial conditions were somewhat different. (For a universe without a beginning, think of *earlier* instead of initial conditions; a difference in earlier conditions is enough for a difference in later states of the universe even with the same laws of nature.) Also, with some *indeterminacy* in the causal laws, the exact nomically regular progression from chaos to order could have differed even without different initial or earlier conditions. So even if the laws of nature are not contingent, there are countless possible ways the universe might have progressed from chaos to order in a nomically regular fashion, and it seems highly likely that some of the ways the universe might have progressed contain less animal distress. The fawn could have followed a slightly different path, thereby avoiding that horrible fire. The gazelle might have lost consciousness before being torn apart by the cheetahs. The bear cub might have been found by its mother before it starved to death. And with different initial conditions, fewer carnivorous species and more herbivores might have evolved.<sup>17</sup> (Note also that each of these scenarios is consistent with God treating animals in an *even-handed* way, for we can imagine an equal decrease in the amount of suffering of all.)

In general, it seems that at least one of the following is true: (i) the laws of nature could have been somewhat different, or (ii) some earlier states of the universe might have been otherwise, or (iii) causal indeterminacy is possible, if not actual.<sup>18</sup> Proposition (ii) is certainly hard to deny, but if any of (i)–(iii) is true, there are countless possible progressions from chaos to order, and nomically regular progressions as well, different from that which actually obtained. For this reason, it seems highly likely that CTO could have obtained along with NR with at least a bit less and probably a lot less animal suffering than that which actually obtained.<sup>19</sup>

17 See Smith's (1991) atheological argument, which appeals to the possibility of vegetarian counterparts of meat-eating animals to show that the law of predation is an ultimately evil natural law, instances of which God would not allow.

18 The mere possibility of indeterministic laws is enough to yield countless possible worlds with the same initial conditions, but a different progression from chaos to order – assuming that the laws of nature are not both deterministic and metaphysically necessary.

19 I should note that inferring A is improbable is unlike those problematic “noseeum” inferences, where one concludes that some proposition is unlikely solely on the basis of not understanding how it could be true. Howard-Snyder (1999, 105) proposes that a “noseeum inference is reasonable only if it is reasonable to believe that we would very likely see (grasp, comprehend, understand) the item in question if it existed.” Note that we would be able to comprehend how Necessity Condition A might be true. For example, if we had reason to believe that the NR and CTO that actually obtains could not have differed, then we would not find A nearly as unlikely, and if we were convinced by one of Murray's neo-Cartesian accounts we might believe that A is true.

The NR + CTO defense is meant to show how animal suffering might be justified, which requires explaining how the evil of animal suffering is necessary for the good achieved. So the story provided by the NR + CTO defense that Murray supports is one which presupposes that Necessity Condition A is true. Given that A is highly likely to be false, it follows that the NR + CTO defense is highly likely to be false. So assuming that an adequate defense against the evidential problem of evil is that the story told is not significantly likely to be false, the NR + CTO defense is inadequate. It is arguable that even on Murray's weak standard of being consistent with one's justified acceptances, the NR + CTO defense should also be considered unacceptable at least by the majority of his target audience, since members of this group would be justified in believing that A is highly unlikely.

The modal skeptic may wonder how I can have any confidence in my judgments about how the world might have been to justifiably believe that A is so unlikely.<sup>20</sup> I admit that I am not in a position to defend my modal intuitions here, although in my defense, I will add the following remark from a confessed modal skeptic: "the resources of an omnipotent being are unlimited – or are limited only by what is intrinsically possible – and . . . a defense must take account of these unlimited resources" (van Inwagen 2006, 70). I also note that one who is in so little position to know how the world might have been would seem to be in no position to have any confidence that Necessity Condition A is plausible enough to serve in defense of one's theism.<sup>21</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

One way to respond to the problem of animal suffering is to simply deny that other animals can experience phenomenal pain and suffering. However, as we have seen, the neo-Cartesian defenses fail to meet the standard of *not being significantly likely to be false*, and at least for the majority of knowledgeable individuals, they also fail to meet Murray's lax standard of *not conflicting with one's justified acceptances*. There is the important additional fact that denying the existence of a certain sort of evil rather than explaining why God allows its existence is an effective strategy only when it is clear that the evil does not exist, and there is very good reason to believe that many other animals experience phenomenally distressful states. So it seems that rather than denying the presence of animal suffering, a convincing defense will need to acknowledge its existence and explain why God would allow it. Yet, as argued in the previous section, the explanation that appeals to NR along with the progression of the universe from CTO fails to meet Necessity Condition A. It is highly unlikely that the putative good of NR and CTO requires all of the animal suffering that actually does and did obtain, and it also seems quite likely that a lot of this suffering is not required.

Murray (2008, chapter 7) proposes that by adding other potential reasons for animal suffering to the NR + CTO defense, we might arrive at an adequate conjunctive defense. I conclude with a few remarks on the prospects of a combined explanation.

Consider a conjunction of possible reasons for animal suffering, each conjunct taking the form, "God allows animal suffering to achieve good x." The amount and degree of animal suffering that has obtained is more likely to be necessary for the truth of a combination of

20 Murray (2008, 34 and 198) expresses skeptical/"inscrutabilist" intuitions.

21 Murray (2008, 30) acknowledges this point.

reasons than it is to be necessary for the truth of any one reason alone. However, the merit of combining reasons is not as great as it might appear. (i) As Murray (195–196) points out, some potential defenses are incompatible with others. For example, the neo-Cartesian defenses that deny the reality of animal suffering conflict with those that try to explain its existence, and a defense that denies prehuman animal suffering (e.g., based on young-universe creationism) is at odds with those, like CTO, that do not. And (ii) of those goods that do form a consistent set, some are already part of the NR + CTO defense. For example, Murray (196–197) offers a list of goods that animal suffering might provide, most of which are goods thought to be achieved by NR and CTO. These include effective human choice, the goal-directed behavior of nonhuman animals, the various other instrumental values of NR and CTO, and whatever intrinsic value they might have. Since these goods are already part of the NR + CTO defense, an explanation of animals suffering that focuses on them is not likely to answer the concerns raised in the previous section. There it was argued that this combination of goods does not require the exact nomically regular progression from chaos to order that actually did obtain, and there very probably could have been a nomically regular progression from chaos to order that achieved these goods with at least a bit less and even a lot less animal suffering.

There are some potential benefits of animal suffering other than those that NR and CTO would already be thought to provide. These other potential goods include a joyful afterlife for nonhuman animals and the freedom (and its misuse) of Adam and Eve or Satan and cohorts. However, (iii) we must keep in mind that adding potential goods to the set of reasons for animal suffering threatens to render the entire conjunction less likely to be true than it already is. For instance, “God allows animal suffering for the sake of NR and CTO *and* increased delight in an animal afterlife” is less likely to be true than “God allows animal suffering for the sake of NR and CTO.” The worry, then, is that while adding more reasons to the combined set makes it more likely that the Necessity Condition is met, the combined set of explanations is less likely to be true than any subset.

It remains to be seen whether the appeal to a combination of reasons for animal suffering can overcome worries (i)–(iii). So I will not conclude with confidence that animal suffering proves God’s existence unlikely, but only that those who wish to convince themselves and others that it does not do so certainly need a stronger defense than what has been provided.

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# Hell and the Problem of Evil

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## Introduction

While accounts of the nature of hell vary within and between religious traditions, formulations of the traditional doctrine include at least the following five elements:

- E1:* Some persons do or will reside in hell and will be there for an infinite period of time.
- E2:* Hell is the residence of those persons who have failed to satisfy some condition(s) dictated by God as necessary to avoid hell and enjoy heaven.
- E3:* The cumulative well-being and well-being at any moment of any resident of hell is negative.
- E4:* Those in hell are blocked from leaving.
- E5:* Those in hell are consigned to hell as punishment for either failing to satisfy the condition(s) God requires for one to avoid hell or for actual sins committed or both.

In this chapter, we explain why the doctrine of hell poses a problem of evil for traditional theists in the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) and how some have responded to the problem.

Our focus is entirely on recent work in analytic philosophical theology. Given that the recent philosophical debates over hell have largely transpired within the context of the Christian theistic tradition, Christian theism provides the backdrop for how we frame the problem and some of the responses in much of what follows. However, this should not be taken as an indication of the problem as unique to traditional Christianity or even that the responses to the problem considered are only available to those who are working from within the Christian tradition.

In what follows, we first summarize the case for why the doctrine of hell poses a problem of evil. Next, we consider recent traditionalist responses to the problem. Finally, we examine some nontraditionalist strategies that involve dispensing with one or more of the five elements of the traditional view.



## The Problem Stated

Some philosophers have argued that the conception of hell that follows from (E1) to (E5) is inconsistent with the traditional conception of God. In particular, it poses a problem for theists who (a) believe in an afterlife and (b) believe that some persons will reside in hell forever. Such theists affirm the following two theses:

- (i) God exists, and is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.
- (ii) Some created persons will be consigned to hell forever.

Marilyn McCord Adams (1993) has argued that (i) and (ii) are logically incompatible in the same way that (i) and

- (iii) Evil exists

have been said to be logically incompatible. Adams' reasoning is in many respects characteristic of recent work on the problem of hell.<sup>1</sup> The case she presents is the primary focus in this section.

Adams (1993, 301–303) argues as follows for the logical incompatibility of (i) and (ii):<sup>2</sup>

- (1) If God existed and were omnipotent, God would be able to avoid (ii).
- (2) If God existed and were omniscient, God would know how to avoid (ii).
- (3) If God existed and were perfectly good, God would want to avoid (ii).
- (4) Therefore, if (i), then not (ii).

If Adams is right, then the truth of (ii), given (4) entails that (i) is not the case. Thus, if persons are sent to hell, then God either does not exist or God lacks one or all of the omni-properties.

The truth of the premises and, hence, the soundness of Adams' argument are, of course, not obvious and a matter of contention. But reasons can be articulated for the truth of each premise. Premises (1) and (2), assuming classical theism, are true. Regarding (1), nothing about the doctrine of omnipotence implies that God is locked into a soteriological scheme, especially if God is sovereign over creation. Moreover, not only would it be within God's power, but God would know how to effect a state of affairs that does not involve (ii) as an aspect of the divine soteriological plan. So God could and would know how to avoid (ii) (Adams 1993, 303–304).

We have reason to take premise (3) as true if God is perfectly good. Regarding the effects of the evil of hell, Adams (1993, 304) asserts that, "Any person who suffers eternal punishment in the traditional hell will . . . be one within whose life good is engulfed and/or defeated by evils." Such a state of affairs is incompatible with divine goodness, especially if God's goodness extends to being concerned about persons created in the divine image. So if God is good, then God would want to avoid (ii).

1 Similar reasoning can be found in Adams (1975), Hick (1978, chapter XVI), and Talbott (1990).

2 We are not using the same numbering as Adams, and we have substituted "God" where Adams has "He."

Of course, one may argue that while it is evil, the evil of hell is not gratuitous since divine justice demands that certain persons be punished. It is gratuitous evils that are the problem. There is nothing gratuitous or unjust about agents receiving the punishment they deserve. But even if one were to argue that suffering is justified punishment for failing to satisfy the requirements for salvation, there are at least three objections to the traditional doctrine of hell that directly challenge the compatibility of divine goodness with the existence of hell.

### *Vagueness*

The first comes from Ted Sider's (2002) paper, "Hell and Vagueness." Sider claims that the traditional conception of hell is committed to arbitrary cutoffs between the unsaved and the saved, and that the arbitrariness of the cutoffs is incompatible with God's perfect justice. It is incompatible due to the discrepancy in treatment between two extremely similar persons who happen to fall on either side of the cutoff.

### *Proportionality*

Stephen Kershnar (2005, 103) assumes that those in hell are being punished and that their experience of hell involves "an infinite net harmful state extended over an infinite amount of time." He argues that if hell is just, then at least some human agents deserve an infinite punishment. But no human being deserves such punishment. Thus, hell is unjust (Kershnar 2005, 105). Assuming retributivism, there is a proportionality requirement for just punishment. A punishment must be proportionate to an agent's desert. Hell is only just if a person deserves an infinite amount of punishment. Kershnar (2005, 107–117) argues that no human being could deserve such a punishment. Thus, we have additional reasons for thinking that hell is inconsistent with divine justice and, by extension, divine goodness.

### *Diminished capacities*

The third problem comes from the limited powers of agents that impede their ability to make good choices prior to death. If God is omniscient, then God would be aware of the powers possessed by agents that both enable them and serve to block them from satisfying the conditions for avoiding eternal punishment. Divine aid in the form of prevenient grace notwithstanding, agents do not have it in their power to fully appreciate the gravity of their circumstances and respond appropriately. For instance, Adams (1993, 309–310) notes an important limitation of human psychology that may contribute to the failure of persons to avoid hell that casts more doubt on the justice of hell. She notes that, "where suffering is concerned, conceivability follows capacity to experience, in such a way that we cannot adequately conceive of what we cannot experience." She adds that, in cases of moral agency, "agent responsibility is diminished in proportion to [an agent's] unavoidable inability to conceive of the relevant dimensions of [an] action and its consequences." She concludes that *mutatis mutandis*, we find a similar problem with hell. Specifically, "damnation is a horror that exceeds our conceptual powers" (Adams 1993, 310). The upshot is that human agents cannot make free choices for which they can be held eternally responsible by God "with fully open eyes." So everlasting torment in hell would be unjust because of the diminished capacities of human agents.

There are at least two disturbing practical implications of the incompatibility of hell with divine goodness that are worth briefly mentioning. The first is an implication for parenting and the second is a problem for religious practice.

### *Morally culpable procreation*

Kenneth Himma (2010) has argued that if an agent believes that she has nothing about which to worry because she is convinced that she has satisfied the divine requirements to avoid hell, then at the very least, she should avoid procreating, since she cannot ensure that her children will follow the right path and avoid eternal torment. In fact, it seems that an agent would be morally culpable for her role in knowingly bringing it about that a human being is brought into the world that might wind up in hell to be punished for an eternity.

### *Religious practice*

Adams argues that the traditional doctrine of hell “would make pragmatically inconsistent any worship behavior that presupposes that God is good to the worshipper or to created persons generally” (Adams 1993, 305). She adds that, assuming the truth of (ii), “open-eyed worship would have to be of a God who mysteriously creates some persons for lives so horrendous on the whole and eternally, that it would have been better for them never to have been born, of a God who is at worst cruel . . . or at best indifferent to our welfare” (Adams 1993, 305–306).

Before moving on to consider some responses that have or may be offered by defenders of variants of the traditional doctrine of hell along with some alternatives, it is worth considering a less than promising but all too often articulated response to the problem of hell. We have christened this response the “Job objection” elsewhere (Buckareff and Plug 2005, 48).<sup>3</sup> The Job objector questions the assumptions about divine goodness and the expectations placed on God in order for God to be perfectly good that are at play in framing the problem of hell. The Job objector may assume a simple version of divine command ethics and argue that the problem is a pseudo-problem. He may appeal to human fallibility, divine ineffability, and God’s being above reproach – no matter what God does and no matter how bad it may seem to us. The Job objector argues that our limited, mortal perspective does not allow us to make judgments about what God can or should do or about what is or is not consistent with the requirements of divine justice (see Chapter 26).

The simplest, most direct, and best answer to the Job objection is that God’s moral obligations do not differ from ours. Given that we do not have any other standards of moral goodness apart from those we apply in human situations, we should apply those standards to God. So we shift the onus on to simple divine command theorists and ask them: “Why should anyone desire to worship or expect non-theists to respect the concept of a being who appears not to be obligated to act as morally as some humans?” (Basinger 1996, 80). And if we believe that a judge or a parent would be unjust in punishing a criminal or a child in a way that is disproportionate and otherwise unfair given the infraction, then why

3 Kyle Swan (2009) defends the Job objection in his critique of Buckareff and Plug (2005). We reply to Swan in Buckareff and Plug (2009).

should we think any differently about God? If God is good and there is a hell, then we should expect that either some morally sound justification exists for allowing for what appears to be a horrific state of affairs or that the traditional view of hell is wide of the mark.

## **The Traditional View of Hell**

We begin our survey of responses to the problem of hell by examining objections and responses to the traditional view of hell in more depth. We discuss nontraditional views of hell in the next section. Here we will focus on the vagueness objection and the proportionality objection. According to both of these objections, at least some of the suffering experienced by those in hell is gratuitous and, hence, inconsistent with divine justice and, thus, God's being perfectly good.

Since both of these objections concern the suffering of those in hell, it is important to first note the reason for that suffering. According to the traditional view, the primary purpose for the suffering in hell is to satisfy the demands of justice.<sup>4</sup> Given that according to the traditional view of hell, those that are consigned to hell are there for eternity, the suffering in hell cannot be for rehabilitative reasons since those in hell have no hope for a place to which they can be restored. Nor can the suffering be for deterrence purposes. If hell has a deterrent effect, that effect is due to the threat of hell. It is not due to the actual suffering of those in hell since we, prior to being consigned to hell, cannot observe the suffering. So any deterrence is due to the threat alone. If the threat *alone* is a sufficient deterrent, then the actual suffering of those in hell is unnecessary to satisfy any deterrent purpose. So for traditional retributive views, the sole reason for the suffering experienced in hell is that suffering is necessary to satisfy the demands of justice. Such suffering is consistent with the existence of God only if it is actually necessary to satisfy the demands of divine justice.

## **The Vagueness Objection**

A fully developed account of hell would include some criterion by which it can be determined who is saved and who is damned. This criterion could be based on whether one has led a sufficiently moral life, or on whether one has developed a sufficiently good character, or if one has a sufficient level of faith. The problem, according to the vagueness objection, is that any possible criterion would admit of borderline cases (Sider 2002). That is, there will be individuals on the border of either side of the cutoff line. Consider a pair of individuals, one of whom barely meets the criterion to enter heaven and the other barely fails to meet that criterion. These two individuals are very similar. Suppose the faith of one was just a little stronger than the other. The one with slightly stronger faith enters heaven while the other person goes to hell. It would be impossible to treat these two individuals in a more disparate manner – one receives the ultimate good, communion with God; the other receives the ultimate punishment, eternal damnation. According to the vagueness objection, this difference in punishment is unjust. It is unjust because it violates a plausible

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4 For recent defenses of the traditional retributivist view of hell, see Cain (2002; 2010).

principle concerning just punishment, what we shall call the *similarity principle*: if two individuals are relevantly similar, then they should be treated similarly. The traditional view violates this principle. The suffering of those who barely fail to meet the criterion is excessive – they should not be treated so differently from those who barely meet the criterion for heaven.

While different responses to the vagueness objection are on offer, we focus on only one because of how it intersects with another strategy found in the broader debates over the problem of evil. Trent Dougherty and Poston (2008) argue that God would not actualize a world with borderline cases.<sup>5</sup> That is, there are no actual cases of individuals that are relevantly similar and one is rewarded with heaven while the other is punished in hell. This is because such a state of affairs would conflict with God's perfect justice. God would not permit such a scenario. So there is a clear difference between the saved and the damned. Admittedly, we cannot identify which individuals are clearly saved and those that are clearly damned. But, according to Dougherty and Poston, there is good reason for this: there would be disastrous consequences if it were clear to us who the clearly saved were and who were the clearly damned. So God has good reason to only actualize a world where there are no borderline cases but yet only actualize a world in which people are unable to clearly distinguish between the saved and the damned.

This response is similar to the skeptical theist response to the evidential problem of evil<sup>6</sup> (see Chapter 29). The skeptical theist claims that it is not surprising (due to our cognitive limitations) that there are certain evils that we cannot see as necessary for a corresponding good. But that is not evidence that there is no such good. Similarly, Dougherty and Poston suggest that it is not surprising that we cannot distinguish between the saved and the damned. But that is not evidence that there is no clear distinction between the two groups.

There are two problems with this response. First, we may not be in the epistemic position that this type of response requires. We are in one of two epistemic positions. The first position is that we cannot see a clear difference between the saved and the damned. The second position is that we see that there is no clear difference between the saved and the damned. We see that there are borderline cases. The first epistemic position is one in which we do not have any evidence that there are relevantly similar individuals who are treated very differently. The second is a position in which we have evidence that there are such individuals. Sider clearly believes we are in the second position. Dougherty and Poston are not clear about which epistemic position we are in, but if we are in the second position, then the proponents of the vagueness objection are in a much stronger position. If we are in the second, then defenders of this skeptical theist style response need to motivate not just that we are unable to identify the saved and the damned, but that our cognitive faculties are in fact unreliable about the matter. In the first situation, the absence of evidence that there is no clear difference between the saved and the damned, is (correctly) not evidence that there is no such difference. In the second situation, we do have evidence that there is no such difference. So the task for a skeptical theist type response is much harder if we are in the second position.

The second problem with Dougherty and Poston's response is that the vagueness objection does not depend upon the existence of borderline cases. This is because the motivating idea behind the similarity principle is that the difference in treatment between two individuals

5 Additional responses to Sider (2002) include Almeida (2008) and Konieczka (2011).

6 See Chapter 29 in this volume for more on skeptical theism.

must be proportionate to the relevant difference between the two cases (see Corabi 2011). For example, a system where the punishment for slapping a person across the face was the same as for murder would be unjust. It would be unjust because it would fail to account for the difference between the two actions.

Consider two individuals, one of whom is in heaven, the other in hell. The difference between their respective treatments is infinite, but the difference between the two individuals could not amount to an infinite difference. For example, if the relevant criterion is having a sufficient level of faith, then the difference between any two individuals, by that criterion, would be finite. But then the difference in treatment between an individual in heaven and one in hell would be disproportionate to the relevant differences between the two individuals. So the traditional view of hell is inconsistent with basic moral intuitions concerning justice.

## The Proportionality Objection

If the traditional view of hell is correct, then some individuals deserve an eternal punishment. Stephen Kershner (2005) has argued that it is impossible for any individual to merit eternal punishment.<sup>7</sup>

The amount of punishment a person may deserve is governed by the *proportionality principle*. The proportionality principle states that the degree of punishment that a person justly merits is proportionate to the level of her wrongdoing. It is possible for a person to deserve infinite punishment only if it is possible for a person to commit an infinite harm. The problem for traditional theories of hell, according to Kershner (2005, 110–117), is that it is impossible for us to be guilty of committing an infinite amount of harm. There are two possibilities to consider: (1) one action that brings about an infinite amount of harm and (2) an infinite number of actions that each cause finite harm. Neither of these is possible.

Consider (1) (Kershner 2005, 112–114). A person may cause infinite harm by performing a single action if he causes infinite harm to a person of finite importance, or he might cause harm to a person of infinite importance (any harm to a person of infinite importance is an infinite harm). The only way to cause an infinite harm to a finite person is to cause that person to go to hell. Any other harm would merely be a finite harm. An infinite regress looms if hell exists solely to punish people for causing others to be sent to hell. It would be better, in this case, for hell not to exist because it would then be impossible for any person to cause infinite harm to another finite person.

If a person can commit an infinite amount of harm in one act, it is only by harming an infinite being. The only infinite being would be God. But the problem here is that according to classical theism, God cannot be harmed. On the classical conception of God, God is impassible and, hence, not liable to being harmed by another being. So we cannot harm God. Since God is the only possible infinite being, it is impossible to commit an infinite harm by harming an infinite being.

This leaves (2): a person can perform an infinite number of actions that cause finite harm (Kershner 2005, 115–117). Since our antemortem existence is finite, the only possible

<sup>7</sup> Adams (1975) and Talbott (1993) also offer versions of this argument.

way to commit an infinite number of harmful acts is if we continue to commit harmful acts postmortem. Heaven, according to tradition, is free from sin and evil. So the only possibility is that a person commits an infinite number of harmful acts by continuing to commit harmful acts in hell (and does so for eternity). But then the moral justification for hell depends on the existence of hell. On this view, the reason for hell is to punish individuals for their actions in hell – but this justification is circular; in effect, hell is needed because hell exists.

There is another problem here as well for the traditional view. Those who are consigned to hell as punishment are consigned there for eternity. However, when a person is consigned to hell, that person does not, at that point, deserve infinite punishment and so the punishment is unjust. One way around this difficulty is to reject that initial punishment is for an eternity in hell but rather for some finite period (a period proportional to the punishment the individual deserves). Hell becomes an eternal punishment due to the sins one commits while in hell that follow from having a sinful disposition. Such a view would be a retributivist variant of the natural consequence view, according to which being in hell is the natural consequence of an agent's exercise of free will.<sup>8</sup> The actions of an agent on such a view would compound the punishment by aggregating finite punishments for an eternity. This would constitute a deviation from the traditional view as we have characterized it in this chapter since on this view, consignment to hell is not essentially permanent (the initial sentence is not one of permanent duration).

## Nontraditional Views of Hell

A nontraditional view of hell is a view that rejects one, or more, of (E1)–(E5). We will consider retributive annihilationist views that reject the permanency of hell; the choice model, and universalism.

### *Annihilationism*

All annihilationists reject (E1). According to annihilationism, those that do not enter into heaven are ultimately annihilated. Annihilation may follow a period spent in hell or it may be immediate. We will refer to the view on which individuals spend some period in hell and are then annihilated as *nonimmediate annihilationism*. And the view on which individuals are immediately annihilated we refer to as *immediate annihilationism*.<sup>9</sup>

There are nonretributive and retributive variants of annihilationism. In this section, we will only consider retributive annihilationist views. We discuss nonretributive annihilationist options in the next section.

Can annihilationist views avoid the vagueness objection or the proportionality objection? This will turn on whether the annihilation of an individual constitutes harm to that individual and, if it is a harm, the magnitude of that harm.

<sup>8</sup> While their views differ in some of the details from the proposal we mention here, see Murray (1999a) and Zeis (1986) for defenses of similar hybrid natural consequence/retributivist models. For critique of such proposals, see Himma (2003).

<sup>9</sup> For a defense of this view by a systematic theologian, see Pinnock (1992; 2007).



On immediate annihilationism, annihilation constitutes a harm to the individual. If it is not a harm, then there is no retributive aspect to the view (since there would not be any punitive measure) and so would not constitute a retributive view. The problem, then, is that immediate annihilationism would be susceptible to a version of the vagueness objection. It is possible that we may have relevantly similar individuals who are treated very differently (one is saved and the other annihilated). So immediate annihilationism does not avoid the vagueness objection.

Furthermore, depending on the magnitude of the punishment, immediate annihilationism would also be susceptible to the proportionality objection. If annihilation constitutes a harm of an infinite magnitude, then annihilation is justified only if individuals are capable of deserving infinite punishment which, according to the proportionality objection, is impossible.

There is reason to believe annihilation constitutes a harm of infinite magnitude. Annihilation is final. It is the ultimate end for an individual. Annihilation precludes any future redemption for the individual and, if Christianity is correct, it precludes any possibility of achieving the ultimate end for an individual, communion with God. It is, in this regard, not different than consigning individuals to hell for eternity. The ultimate punishment in an eternal hell is the permanent separation from God. Annihilationism is no different in this respect.

Does nonimmediate annihilation fare better?<sup>10</sup> If annihilation constitutes a harm of infinite magnitude, then nonimmediate annihilationism is susceptible to the proportionality objection. It is susceptible because, on this view, the residents of hell would receive infinite punishment. Indeed, if annihilation is a harm of infinite magnitude, then nonimmediate annihilation has the problem that the period spent in hell prior to annihilation would be pointless. It is pointless because everyone consigned to hell is consigned to a punishment of infinite magnitude – the extra time in hell would not add to an infinite punishment.

If annihilation is not a harm of infinite magnitude, then whether nonimmediate annihilation avoids the vagueness and proportionality objections depends upon the level of harm inflicted on an individual during a moment in hell. If a moment in hell inflicts an infinite harm, then those who spend any time in hell receive an infinite punishment. But if so, then the proportionality objection still applies. If a moment in hell constitutes a great deal of harm (but of finite magnitude), then nonimmediate annihilationism may still be subject to the vagueness objection because individuals who fall just on either side of the dividing line are treated very differently. So individuals who are relevantly similar would receive very different treatment, and their difference in treatment would not be warranted by their relevant differences.

If the harm that results from a single moment in hell is not too excessive, then nonimmediate annihilationism does avoid the vagueness and proportionality objections. The punishment would be finite so the proportionality objection would be avoided. The degree of punishment comes in degrees, and so the difference in degree of treatment between any two individuals will be proportionate to the relevant differences between the two individuals that would allow the view to avoid the vagueness objection. Still, the view has the

10 Nonimmediate annihilationism is defended in Fudge (1994). The case made therein is a biblical case and is not philosophically sophisticated.



problem of God only allowing persons to continue to exist postmortem for the purpose of punishing them. It is only if the agents willingly destroy themselves after being punished that their passing out of existence would appear just. Otherwise, it would seem that their postmortem existence was solely for the purpose of being punished. On such a view, once released, God would annihilate agents.

## The Choice Model

While they vary in important respects in their details, all variants of the choice model (CM) dispense with (E5).<sup>11</sup> Thus, they differ from the traditional view by rejecting the retributive nature of hell. Also, if there are any people in hell it is because either they choose to be there or because hell is the natural consequence of their choices, both antemortem and postmortem. In this regard, by emphasizing free agency and the consequences of its exercise, CM is representative of the Augustinian response to the problem of evil.

Regarding (E5), broadly, on CM, hell is a place for those who do not wish to be in communion with God. Hell issues from God's love for all of God's creatures. God's ultimate desire is for all persons to enter into communion with God. However, some persons do not wish to be in communion with God. So, out of love for created persons, God provides a place, hell, for those who do not wish to be in communion with God. God does not consign persons to hell so that they may receive some putatively deserved punishment. Rather, the residents of hell are there because they choose or desire to be apart from God. Any negative postmortem well-being experienced by an agent at any time is a consequence of the choices the agent has made and continues to make postmortem.<sup>12</sup>

The vagueness and proportionality objections to the traditional view of hell rest on assumptions concerning just punishment – specifically, they rest on assumptions regarding the degree of punishment a person might justly deserve. Being in hell, according to CM, is not (primarily) retributive punishment<sup>13</sup> and so the vagueness and proportionality objections do not apply. The main objection that at least some CM views might face is a version of the diminished capacities objection.

The problem is that at least some individuals who choose to be apart from God are not in a position to make an informed antemortem or immediate postmortem decision about such a matter. But the decision to be apart from God is final or has binding consequences and it deprives those individuals from ever obtaining the benefits of communion with God. But that it so deprives individuals is a result of God making residence in hell permanent. In effect, God is forcing individuals to make a decision of utmost importance when those individuals are not capable of making an informed decision. But that is unjust. It is not

11 Variants of CM can be found in Swinburne (1983), Stump (1986), Walls (1992), Kvanvig (1993, 2011), and Buckareff and Plug (2005; 2009; 2010).

12 On most versions of CM, the state of affairs of one's being in hell is negative on the whole. An exception to this view is the escapist variant we have defended on which those in hell enjoy some positive well-being that is qualitatively inferior to the state of being in heaven. See Buckareff and Plug (2005; 2010).

13 While some CM theorists reject the notion that hell is punishment, others do not reject any punitive dimension to hell. For instance, Kvanvig argues that God's primary motivation is love, but in loving those in hell, God (Kvanvig 1993, 155) "is forced to act in such a way that persons in hell are punished."

morally acceptable to permanently withhold a benefit from a person when that person is not in a position to make an informed decision regarding that benefit.<sup>14</sup>

To avoid this problem, defenders of CM should deny (E4) – the view that those in hell are blocked from ever leaving. If it is possible to leave hell, then it would be open for a person to change their mind regarding accepting the benefits of heaven or perhaps even choose annihilation.<sup>15</sup> In any case, what is important is that a person's initial refusal to reject communion with God is not, on this view, a decision to permanently reject communion with God.

There are two different ways one can deny (E4). One can endorse the view that those in hell have a finite period of time to decide to enter into communion with God, or one can endorse the view that those in hell always have the ability to decide to enter into communion with God.<sup>16</sup> If those in hell have just a finite period to decide to enter into communion with God, then the view is still subject to the diminished capacities objection. If, at the end of the period during which a person in hell may change his mind, a person chooses not to enter into communion with God, that person has effectively decided to reject the benefits of communion with God for eternity. But it is not clear that any finite person can fully understand the ramifications of such a choice. And if a finite person cannot fully understand the ramifications of such a choice, then his choice to do so would not constitute an informed decision. Only variants of CM according to which a person in hell always has the ability to choose to enter into communion with God avoid the diminished capacities objection. An upshot of such views is agnosticism about the truth of (E1) and room is made for a weak, contingent form of universalism. But a difficulty that remains for such views lies in accounting for the finality of hell.<sup>17</sup> For reasons we have developed elsewhere, we do not think this is an insurmountable problem for such variants of CM (see Buckareff and Plug 2010, 83–89).

## Universalist Strategies

Universalism avoids the problem of evil posed by hell either by denying outright that anyone will ever suffer in hell or by denying that anyone would reside in hell for an eternity. If persons are in hell, it is best understood as a temporary place of preparation for heaven. Thus, universalists reject (E1) and (E4) among the five elements that are constitutive of the traditional view of hell. Some also reject some or all of (E2), (E3), and (E5).<sup>18</sup>

14 Worries about religious luck and the differing obstacles agents must overcome in order to be redeemed are never far away. See Jones (2007) for more on religious luck and hell and Buckareff and Plug (2009) for a reply.

15 Some proponents of CM or views that approximate CM have endorsed or at least seriously considered the notion that God allows persons to effectively annihilate themselves as a consequence of their choices and characters developed. See Swinburne (1989, 180–184) and Griffiths (2008).

16 In the interest of rendering his version of CM compatible with the finality of the final judgment, Kvanvig (1993, 156) argues for the view that those in hell have a finite period to accept God's grace and enter into communion with God. Buckareff and Plug (2005) argue for the view that those in hell always have the ability to accept God's grace.

17 See Kvanvig (2011, chapters 1 and 2).

18 Universalism has also been offered as a way to avoid a problem of evil for those in *heaven*. Friederich Schlegelmacher (1830, 721–722) argued that the bliss and joy of the saved would be sullied by their awareness of the existence of persons suffering the torments of hell. Hence, he argued that all must be reconciled with God. For a recent defense of this argument, see Reitan (2002).

Broadly, two versions of universalism can be distinguished (Murray 1999b). The first is *naïve universalism*. It is the view that every person is transformed at death and reconciled with God. This view has had few actual adherents.<sup>19</sup>

The second version of universalism, *sophisticated universalism*, has been the most widely discussed version of universalism in the recent literature on hell. In the interest of brevity, we only discuss sophisticated universalism given its prominent role in the literature. So, by “universalism,” we shall mean sophisticated universalism in what follows.

Universalists allows for an intermediate state before unredeemed persons finally enter into communion with God in which God continues to work on such persons until they have been reconciled with God. To the extent that this intermediate state may be accurately described as hell, the purpose of hell is redemption. For those who are not redeemed before death, this intermediate state is a stop on their way to heaven.

Some maintain that the postmortem removal of impediments to making a rational free choice and having the right sort of encounter with God would result in an agent’s freely choosing communion with God (Talbot 2010, 24–27). Others argue that God may finally manipulate the wills of recalcitrant agents. Marilyn McCord Adams (1999, 157) sees such divine maneuvering as “no more an insult to our dignity than a mother’s changing a baby’s diaper is to the baby.” Such an approach is problematic not only for those who endorse libertarian theories of free agency but also for most compatibilists. But the good achieved by such manipulation far outweighs the value of having the power to make a free choice in this grave matter, according to Adams. Thus, her approach represents a departure from the Augustinian tradition that emphasizes the value of free will as part of a response to the problem of evil.

We only focus on versions of two of the most relevant objections to universalism as a solution to the problem of hell. The first objection is the *gratuitous earthly life objection*.<sup>20</sup> The second objection is *the objection from the denial of autonomy*.

*The gratuitous earthly life objection* states that the earthly existence of human beings is a gratuitous evil if universalism is true. This is surprising, since universalism is a proposed solution to a particular problem of evil. The problem arises for universalism because human beings experience a range of evils and make morally significant choices over the course of their lives. If everyone finally enjoys communion with God, then the choices of agents and the suffering experienced in their earthly existence are pointless in the end (Murray 1999b, 56). Our earthly existence appears pointless, since the final outcome for all persons is the same on universalism, even if it takes more time for some to be reconciled with God than others.

But, *contra* the critic of universalism, an agent’s earthly existence does bear directly on how things go postmortem even if no one will finally reside in hell. While God will guarantee that all will eventually choose communion with God, an agent’s choice may initially be motivated not by love for God and a desire for communion with God, but out of a sense of self-concern. For instance, agents may choose communion with God because God ensures that they recognize that the state of affairs of communion with God is infinitely

19 Jacques Ellul (1989, 192) appears to have endorsed naïve universalism. Daniel Howard-Snyder (2003) offers a defense of naïve universalism against Murray’s (1999b) critique. Howard-Snyder does not actually endorse naïve universalism.

20 Murray (1999a; 1999b) originally formulated this as an objection to naïve universalism. We have made adjustments to make it a general objection to universalism.

better than any other alternative (whether actual or not). So nothing about the transformation God would have to bring about in order to guarantee that an agent chooses God necessitates that God would completely change the character of an agent. Thus, there could be degrees of communion with God. And the postmortem degree of communion with God an agent enjoys depends upon the character of the agent at the time she chooses to be reconciled with God. In other words, while every agent who did not do so in their antemortem state may enter into communion with God in their postmortem existence, this does not require that the communion enjoyed be perfect.<sup>21</sup> The agent may still be in need of growth in order to enter into perfect communion with God. How much growth is necessary is, in part, a function of the character developed over the course of an agent's antemortem existence (see Talbott 2001a, 103).

The notion of there being degrees of communion and postmortem growth is not foreign to Christian thought. If the doctrine of purgatory is correct, then some of the redeemed must first offer some satisfaction for their sins and/or complete the process of sanctification or *theosis* before they enter heaven.<sup>22</sup> The universalist is extending the basic motivation behind this doctrine to include all created persons. Some persons need time and the right environment to finally make the right choice and begin on the path toward perfect communion. The antemortem choices such agents make bear directly on their postmortem state and how difficult it will be for them to choose to commune with God and begin the process of growing closer to God.

The foregoing response has a distinctively Irenean quality. Our earthly existence – including the evils experienced and the choices we make – is essential for the development of our characters (see Chapter 12). It is but one stage on the way toward the goal of perfect communion with God. That everyone will be redeemed and finally enter into perfect communion with God may be guaranteed. But how they get there and what they need to experience – both antemortem and postmortem – to get to that point may differ from person to person.

The *denial of autonomy objection* starts with the observation that what is central to Augustinian responses to the problem of evil is not just freedom of choice understood in libertarian terms. What is no less important is the *autonomy* of agents, where this is understood as the power to have an impact on the external world as a consequence of one's free choices (Murray 1999b, 58) (see Chapter 14). The existence of creatures with this power is the good that outweighs the cost of permitting moral evil.

Universalism threatens autonomy, according to Michael Murray. Those who choose communion with God have their choices respected. They enter into communion with God. But the choices of those who reject communion with God are not efficacious, either antemortem or postmortem. They are never fully separated from God. Whether such an agent must simply choose again or is instructed about the error of her ways and then must choose again, the problem is the same, according to Murray (1999b, 64). He writes: "In the end, if I choose to cultivate a character which includes the disposition to shun communion with God, I will not be allowed to become that sort of person." The agent's choice is inefficacious. Hence, the agent's autonomy is vitiated.

21 Daniel Howard-Snyder (2003, 346–348) makes a similar point in defense of naïve universalism.

22 For representative philosophical defenses of the doctrine of purgatory from Protestant perspectives, see David Brown (1985) and Jerry Walls (2002). Neal Judisch (2009) presents a Roman Catholic response to what he takes to be some confusion in the Protestant formulations.

In response to this objection, Eric Reitan (2001, 232–238) has argued that there are two ways to understand the postmortem choices of agents (Reitan 2001, 233). On the first way, a choice, whether for communion with God or alienation from God, will deprive an agent of all future choices. On the second way, an agent is choosing communion with God *at that moment* or alienation from God *at that moment*. The first scenario is one that restricts our autonomy. On the second, an agent's choice is never rejected. The second way of understanding the choices of agents is consistent with universalism, according to Reitan. Reitan (2001, 233) writes that, "all are ultimately saved . . . because all eventually come to realize that communion with God is preferable to alienation, and all are eventually stripped of affective states that inhibit their capacity to choose what is preferable." While Thomas Talbott does not explicitly endorse Reitan's reasoning, Reitan's reasoning is consistent with the sort of view espoused by Talbott. For instance, Talbott (1990, 39) writes that, "The more one freely rebels against God, the more miserable and tormented one becomes; and the more miserable and tormented one becomes, the more incentive one has to repent of one's sin and to give up one's rebellious attitudes." If Reitan and Talbott are correct, then it is not obvious that universalism commits one to a denial of autonomy.

Even if the universalist has successfully replied to the autonomy objection, one worry remains. Assuming that rational agents have free will, whether of a libertarian or compatibilist variety, there is still the worry that God cannot guarantee that everyone will be reconciled with God absent manipulating them.<sup>23</sup> Suppose that, as a matter of fact, everyone chooses to enter into communion with God without divine manipulation occurring. It may be argued that it is still the case that things could have been such that some may not finally have been redeemed since there may have been some wild cards that proved recalcitrant and unwilling to budge. Even if these agents actually choose reconciliation with God, they had the power to choose differently. And because of their possession of this power, it is possible that not everyone is reconciled with God unless God exercises manipulative control over some agents. This is so because these agents could have exercised their power to choose differently. Of course, some may not worry about this, particularly those attracted to the Irenean strand of theodicy with respect to the broader problem of evil. Recall that Marilyn McCord Adams finds divine manipulation no more problematic than the sort of paternalistic manipulation of a child by a parent done in the interest of keeping the child from harm. So those attracted to her position may simply insist that in a scenario where agents persist in their rebellion, it is best that God manipulates their wills, rendering agents powerless to choose differently.<sup>24</sup> But if we find anything attractive about the Augustinian strand and its emphasis on the value of free agency, we may be more sensitive to the problem raised by the means God would perhaps have to take to ensure universal salvation and thereby avoid the problem of hell altogether.

23 For the case for why manipulation would not be necessary because of how an agent's range of choices is narrowed over time, rendering the agent more open to reconciliation given a variety of factors, including what an agent learns about the consequences of previous choices, see Talbott (2007, 455–457).

24 Perhaps surprisingly, Talbott (2001b) argues that universalism itself does not require divine manipulation of the wills of agents. However, free will theodicies of hell (e.g., variants of the CM on which persons do not actually leave hell) do require that God interfere with the free agency of persons in inappropriate ways.

## Acknowledgment

Thanks to Thomas Talbott for his helpful comments on a draft of this chapter.

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# The Problem of Apparently Morally Abhorrent Divine Commands

WESLEY MORRISTON

If God is morally perfect, there must be many things that could not be commanded by him, and it might seem to be quite easy to name some of them. William Lane Craig, for example, says that it is absolutely impossible for God to command rape (Craig *et al.* 2009, 172) or to command us to eat our children (Craig and Antony 2008). David Baggett and Jerry Walls say that it would be impossible for God to command us to “rape and pillage hapless peasants in a rural village of Africa” (Baggett and Walls 2011, 134).<sup>1</sup>

“Absolutely impossible” may somewhat overstate the case. Circumstances matter, and an imaginative philosopher might perhaps conjure up a world in which God is morally justified in commanding someone to do these things. But even if such a world were genuinely possible, it would bear little resemblance to the actual world. As things actually are, commands like these do not pass moral muster and cannot reasonably be attributed to God. As Robert Adams rightly says, “purported messages from God” must be tested for “coherence with ethical judgments formed in the best ways available to us” (Adams 1999, 284). If someone were to cite a “message from God” as justification for rape or pillage or eating children, we would rightly conclude that he was a charlatan or a madman.

Should this moral test be applied even to biblical reports of divine commands?<sup>2</sup> This is a serious issue, because the biblical record contains a number of divine commands that

1 Craig says that wondering whether these things would be morally obligatory if God commanded them “is like wondering whether, if there were a round square, its area would equal the square of one of its sides” (Craig *et al.* 2009, 172).

2 Adams (1999, 284) quotes with approval the words of Immanuel Kant: “Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: ‘That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down from (visible) heaven.’” On the other hand, Adams also says this: “The command addressed to Abraham in Genesis 22 should not be rejected *simply* because it challenges prevailing values. . . . Religion would be not only safer than it is, but also less interesting and less rich as a resource for moral and spiritual growth, if it did not hold the potentiality for profound challenges to current moral opinion” (Adams 1999, 285). Despite this qualification, one is left with the strong impression that Adams does not believe that God has ever commanded anyone to sacrifice a human life.



are – on the face of it – every bit as morally objectionable as those mentioned in the first paragraph. Among the most worrisome passages are those in which God is represented as mandating the extermination of a large number of people. In Deuteronomy, Moses says that the God of Israel commands him to “annihilate” the “Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites,” (Deuteronomy 20:17) to “show them no mercy” (Deuteronomy 7:2), and not to “let anything that breathes remain alive” (Deuteronomy 20:16).<sup>3</sup> In another morally troubling passage, the prophet Samuel tells King Saul that God commands him to annihilate the Amalekites. “[D]o not spare them,” Samuel says, “but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Samuel 15:3). For brevity’s sake, I shall frequently refer to these as the “terror texts.”<sup>4</sup>

It is worthy of note that these passages occur within quotations – from Moses’ farewell address in Deuteronomy and from Samuel’s report of what the LORD had said King Saul was to do. This might seem to open up the possibility that the Bible accurately represents what Moses and Samuel said, but that they misunderstood what God wanted the Israelites to do. It would then be misleading simply to say that these horrific divine commands are present in the biblical record. What is undeniably present in the record is merely that Moses and Samuel said that God had commanded these things.<sup>5</sup>

What should we make of this suggestion? Let us begin with the passages in Deuteronomy. They are taken from a lengthy speech that includes a repetition of the Ten Commandments, the *shema* (“Hear O Israel”), and many other favorite passages. It also celebrates past battle victories in which the Israelites had “destroyed” everyone, killing men, women, and children (Deuteronomy 2:34; 3:3; 3:6–7). Moses says they were able to do this because the LORD “handed [them] over to us” (Deuteronomy 3:3). This sounds bad to us, but it seems not to have troubled the author(s) of Deuteronomy, which contains not a word of criticism of anything Moses says in the farewell speech and concludes with the highest praise for Moses: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform . . .” (Deuteronomy 34:10–12). It would be natural to conclude that Deuteronomy implicitly endorses all that Moses has told the people in his farewell address.

Matters become even clearer as the Deuteronomistic history continues in the book of Joshua. There we learn that the Israelite army (under the leadership of Joshua, who also has a very close relationship to God) proceeded to carry out Moses’ instructions with regard to the Canaanite nations. After the assault on Debir, for example, the text says that Joshua “left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, *as the LORD God of Israel commanded*” (Joshua 10:40, my italics). Similarly, the text says that after defeating Hazor, the Israelite army killed everyone in Hazor and the neighboring towns. “[T]hey did not leave any who breathed” (Joshua 11:14). The words immediately following this passage are particularly significant: “*As the LORD commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did: he left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses*”

3 All biblical quotations are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version*, copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

4 These are by no means the only morally problematic texts in the Bible. For a broader indictment, see Curley (2011) and Fales (2011).

5 One of the reviewers of this chapter stressed this point, seeing it as a solution to the whole problem.

(Joshua 11:15, my italics).<sup>6</sup> As far as the terror texts are concerned, I think we can safely put aside the suggestion that there is any distance between what the biblical record says that *God commanded* and what it says that *Moses said God commanded*.

But what about the case of Samuel? He, too, is presented as an authentic prophet who has a very close relationship with God (see especially 1 Samuel 3:19–4:1). In 1 Samuel 15, the clear implication is that Samuel was conveying a message he had received from the LORD. Consider, for example, what is written about King Saul's failure to obey the letter of this command. Instead of destroying everyone and everything, Saul brings back the best of the animals and the King of the Amalekites in chains. At this point in the narrative, the text does not merely quote Samuel. "*The word of the LORD came to Samuel,*" it says, "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and *has not carried out my commands*" (1 Samuel 15:10, my italics). Given the immediate context, the commands referenced here must include those conveyed by Samuel with respect to the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:3). So in this case, too, the text puts no distance between God and the horrific commands attributed to him by a trusted prophet.

It seems, then, that we can safely conclude that the biblical record attributes to God commands to exterminate various peoples. But perhaps this can be softened a bit. It is sometimes suggested that the language of the terror texts is hyperbolic, and that God did not really mean to tell the Israelites to kill *everyone*. As Paul Copan has pointed out, such "exaggeration rhetoric" was common in the ancient Near East, and the biblical authors often made use of it. Evidence of this can sometimes be found in the texts themselves. For example, immediately after telling the Israelites to "utterly destroy" the Canaanite peoples (Deuteronomy 7:2), God tells them not to "intermarry" (Deuteronomy 7:3) with them, thereby implying that young Canaanite women would still be available for marriage. Copan concludes that "utterly destroy" must be read as an exaggerated way of saying something much weaker (Copan 2011, 172–173).

Copan's point about "exaggeration rhetoric" may be correct, but by itself it does little to reconcile these alarming texts with "ethical judgments formed in the best ways available to us." If a text merely said, "Kill as many of them as you can," or even, "Kill *lots* of men, women, children, and infants," it would still count as a terror text, and there would still be a serious problem for those who believe that it correctly represents a command of God. How can it be other than grotesquely implausible to suggest that such commands were given by a being who is by nature perfectly good?

It would be natural to conclude that the attribution of such commands to God is not divinely inspired, and that such passages merely reflect the flawed moral standards of a primitive people whose view of God's nature was very different from our own. The all-too-human authors of these texts may have thought that God wanted their ancestors to kill women and children in wars of conquest, but there is no need for us to join them in thinking this.

According to many highly respected theistic philosophers, however, it is inappropriate to reject any part of Scripture on moral grounds.<sup>7</sup> Eleonore Stump speaks for many when she writes:

6 At one point, the text even says that the LORD hardened the hearts of the inhabitants of some towns "so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated, *just as the LORD had commanded Moses*" (Joshua 11:20, my italics).

7 See, for example, Bergmann *et al.* (2011, 7–8).

If one passage can be set aside because it strikes us as incompatible with our moral intuitions, then others may have to be treated in the same way. But then our moral intuitions will be the standard by which the texts are judged, and the texts can't function as divine revelation is meant to function, as a standard by which human beings can measure and correct human understanding, human standards, and human behavior. (Stump 2011, 181)

Stump gives the same reason for not following the lead of church fathers like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, who saw the terror texts as allegorical or metaphorical ways of talking about spiritual warfare against sin.<sup>8</sup> Interpreting them this way would require us to use human moral standards to decide “which texts can be taken literally and which have to be taken allegorically” – in which case, once again, we would not be letting the Bible “supply a standard by which human affairs and human views can be corrected,” (Stump 2011, 181).

These considerations lead Stump to conclude that we should not interpret a difficult historical text in such a way that it “says something very different from its obvious literal meaning,” (Stump 2011, 181). Not only must we interpret such texts literally – we must try to find a way to approve of them and learn from them. To this end, it must somehow be made plausible to say that God had morally sufficient reasons for issuing each of the “annihilation” commands.

What might these reasons be? As it happens, Scripture is not silent on the matter. The Canaanites are to be wiped out “so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 20:17–18). The Amalekites, on the other hand, are to be punished for what their ancestors had done “in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt” (1 Samuel 15: 2).

These biblical justifications raise new and troubling questions. Are the reasons stated in the terror texts worthy of a perfectly good and loving God? Would commanding the Israelites to kill large numbers of people be a morally acceptable way to prevent them from adopting “abhorrent” religious practices? Would it be morally acceptable to punish the Amalekites of Samuel's day for what a previous generation of Amalekites had done to a previous generation of Israelites?

At the very least, those who deny that there are serious moral errors in the Bible must show that it is not unreasonable to believe that *the biblical rationale* for each problematic command is consistent with God's perfect goodness. In making this demand, we are not asking anyone to read the mind of God. But we are asking that everyone read what the terror texts say about God's actions and about the intentions behind them, and consider whether it is plausible to suppose that they accurately represent the actions and intentions of a God who is perfectly loving and just.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall consider the attempts of several respected Christian philosophers to meet this challenge. They have been chosen as representatives of three distinct approaches: (1) taking the biblical rationale at face value and trying to show that it is entirely acceptable as it stands (Swinburne 2011); (2) speculating about acceptable reasons other than those mentioned in the text (Stump 2011); and (3) arguing that human beings cannot possibly know enough to be justified in rejecting these troubling texts (Murphy 2011; Plantinga 2011).

8 Swinburne (2007, 271).

## Richard Swinburne and the Canaanites

Richard Swinburne has a highly sophisticated hermeneutical apparatus that distinguishes between different meanings a text can have in smaller and larger contexts, and in different historical and cultural contexts. Unlike Stump, he is open to nonliteral interpretations of morally problematic texts. If, when taken literally, a passage “depicts God as evil,” then Swinburne says we should “interpret it metaphorically” (Swinburne 2011, 233).<sup>9</sup>

One might have thought that passages depicting God as commanding the extermination of whole nations (including innocent children) would be sufficient to trigger a metaphorical interpretation. But when Swinburne considers passages like the ones cited earlier, he sees no need to do so.<sup>10</sup> Since God is our creator, he says, “our life comes as a temporary gift from him,” and God “can take it back when he chooses.” God also has a right to command someone else to “take it back for him.” From this it follows that God “has the right to order to Israelites to kill the Canaanites” (Swinburne 2011, 224).

But do the Israelites have a moral obligation to obey such a command? Indeed they do. God, after all, is “our supreme benefactor,” and the Israelites (like all of us) have an obligation to please him by obeying his commands. So if God commands them to annihilate the Canaanites, they have an obligation to do just that.

Thus far, we have spoken only of divine rights and human obligations. But this can hardly be the whole story. Even if God has a right to command one people to annihilate another, he would not exercise that right unless he had a morally sufficient reason for doing so. So why did God command the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites? Swinburne offers the following explanation:

God’s reason for issuing this command, according to the Old Testament, was to preserve the young monotheistic religion of Israel from lethal spiritual infection by the polytheism of the Canaanites [Deut. 12: 31], a religion which included child sacrifice and cultic prostitution [1 Kings 14: 24]. (Swinburne 2011, 224)

In this respect, then, Swinburne follows the biblical explanation to the letter. God does not want Israelite men to marry Canaanite women, lest they succumb to the temptation to worship Canaanite gods and participate in loathsome religious observances. One way to prevent this from happening is to remove the foreigners from the scene by killing them.

This might seem to be a drastic solution, but Swinburne thinks the danger of contamination by Canaanite culture was very serious.

Such spiritual infection was no doubt a very real danger. When monotheism had become more deeply rooted in Israel, such an extreme measure was not, according to the Old Testament, required again. It was a defensive measure needed to preserve the identity of the people of Israel. (Swinburne 2011, 224)

This cannot be the whole story, of course. If God wanted the Canaanites out of the way, he could have accomplished this without involving the Israelites in any way. Why, then, did

<sup>9</sup> Swinburne thinks that some passages may have both a straightforward historical meaning and a metaphorical or allegorical one.

<sup>10</sup> This is his position in Swinburne (2011). In Swinburne (2007), he left the matter open.

he use them to do the job? Swinburne suggests that God wanted to teach the Israelites an important lesson.

God surely also had a reason for using the Israelites, rather than natural processes such as disease, to kill the Canaanites, which was to bring home to the Israelites the enormous importance of worshiping and teaching their children to worship the God who had revealed himself to them, and no other god. (Swinburne 2011, 224–225)

What are we to make of Swinburne's explanations? Several issues are worth mentioning, however briefly. The first concerns the treatment of the Canaanites. Suppose that their religion was just as dangerous as Swinburne assumes. One might have thought God would try to rescue them from its power by showing them the error of their ways. But even if God rightly thought that the adults were incorrigible, it is hard to see what could have justified him in commanding the extermination of innocent Canaanite children.

A second worry is that commanding the Israelites to slaughter large numbers of men, women, and children would have been bad for their moral development. Planting the seed of ethical monotheism is a worthy goal. But enforcing worship of a fierce deity who cares nothing for the lives and property of those who are not members of his chosen tribe might be expected to harden hearts and make life seem cheap.<sup>11</sup>

Third, and most importantly, how can we be sure that “such extreme measures” will not be required again? How can we be sure they will not be required of *us*? Swinburne seems to open the door to this very possibility when he writes:

Even today and without a divine command many people would think it justified to kill people who had an infectious lethal disease and refused to be kept isolated from the rest of the population. Those who think that an infection which leads to spiritual death is as bad an evil as one which leads to natural death will think that there are reasons (though not of course adequate reasons) for the Israelites to kill the Canaanites even without a divine command. (Swinburne 2011, 225)

This is quite a dangerous idea. Even today, many people are carriers of what Swinburne would surely count as “an infection which leads to spiritual death.” Consider, for example, the so-called New Atheists, who are only too eager to broadcast their message. Monotheism is not in immediate danger of disappearing due to their efforts, but they have some influence and many young people are attracted to their cause. So, then, should Richard Dawkins and his allies be “isolated from the rest of the population?” If they refused, should we think that there are reasons – though not adequate ones – to kill them?

Perhaps we can push this thought a bit further. Imagine a pastor who is concerned about a local atheist organization that has lured some young people away from his church. He prays for divine guidance, and comes to believe that God wants his church to be the instrument of divine justice. Fresh from this “discovery,” he tells his congregants that God has a special mission for them: they are to stop this spiritual infection in its tracks by killing those atheists. Many church members are skeptical, but the Pastor reassures them by pointing out that “our life comes as a temporary gift from God,” that God has a right “to take it back when he chooses,” and that God also a right to commission someone else “take it back for him.”

11 For extensive replies to these (and many other) objections, see Copan (2011).

I am confident that Swinburne, like the rest of us, would reject the claims of such a pastor. In the first edition of his book on revelation, Swinburne (1992, 86) advocates a moral test for purported revelations. A prophet's teaching, he says, "must not involve telling men to do what is evidently wrong." If he "commends cheating and child torture," he can be "dismissed straightaway."

In the second edition of the same book, Swinburne includes murder as an example of something a true prophet would not commend, but he also introduces an important qualification.

If it tells us that rape and lying, murder and theft (*without exceptional divine permission*) are good, then that is good reason for supposing the candidate revelation not to be a genuine one. (Swinburne 2007, 110, my italics)

Swinburne may have included the italicized words only because he wanted to leave a bit of space for *biblical* reports of just such commands. Unfortunately, he has also left ample room for our imaginary Pastor's "revelation" to slip through. After all, the Pastor does not claim that God has simply set aside the rule against killing; he claims merely that God has made a *special exception* to the general rule. There may, of course, be other reasons for dismissing his prophetic claim. But it is difficult to see how Swinburne (or at least Swinburne circa 2007) can consistently reject it *on purely moral grounds*.

### Eleonore Stump and the Amalekites

Eleonore Stump is cautious in the way she handles the story of Samuel and the Amalekites. We come to the text with such different presuppositions, she says, that a coherent account that would satisfy everyone is obviously impossible. So Stump asks us merely to join her doing a thought experiment. We are to consider whether this story could be true in a "putatively possible world" that satisfies certain conditions. In the world of the thought experiment, it is stipulated that: (i) the universe is created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly God, (ii) human beings do not cease to exist at death but live forever, (iii) God "desires all human beings to be united to him in love forever," (iv) human beings have libertarian free will, and (v) there is an objective, divinely approved moral standard that forbids murder and cruelty to animals (Stump 2011, 182).

There is one final stipulation. Because Stump wants to focus on "what is particular to the story of Samuel and the Amalekites," and not on the general problem posed by human and animal suffering, she stipulates that God has a "morally sufficient reason for allowing the suffering of human beings and animals" that includes benefits within their own lives. "On this stipulation," Stump says, "each sufferer is the protagonist of his own life story, and in that story *his suffering is defeated by benefits that accrue to him from his suffering*" (Stump 2011, 183, my italics).

If we make this additional assumption about the "putatively possible world," we will not need to worry about the suffering of the Amalekites.

In the world of my thought experiment, God loves all human persons, and he doesn't use the suffering of any human beings solely as a means to some good for others. In the world of my thought experiment, in some story we do not have, another one of the Abrahamic peoples,

the Amalekites and not the Israelites, are the main protagonists; and the point of their suffering is the provision of benefits *for them*. (Stump 2011, 193, my italics)

Can we take seriously the idea that being brutally slaughtered by invaders was good for individual Amalekites (and for their animals!)? Some might think that this final stipulation makes the world of Stump's thought experiment so dissimilar to the actual world as to be of little interest in the present context. But even if it were utterly implausible to suppose that horrific suffering is always defeated by benefits that accrue to its victims,<sup>12</sup> it would still be interesting to know whether, given this generous stipulation, Stump can give a plausible account of God's reasons for *commanding the Israelites* to embark on an extermination campaign against the Amalekites. How could this have been a good thing *for the Israelites*?

This is the question Stump tries to answer. Her principal claim is that – in the world of her thought experiment – God may be gradually forming Israel into a just and loving people fit for union with himself, and that commanding Israel to destroy Amalek is understandable within that larger context. Before she can explain and defend this claim, however, she must say something about the morally questionable reason for this command given in the text itself. As noted above, the Amalekites are to be punished “for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt” (1 Samuel 15: 2).

Stump does not deny that this translation is based on a possible interpretation of the text; nor does she challenge the claim that it is morally repugnant to punish a people for the sins of its ancestors. She merely suggests that the story “does not have to be read in this way” (184). Perhaps, she says, God remembers what the Amalekites did to Israel long ago, sees that they are on a very bad moral trajectory, and concludes that it would be “better *for the Amalekites* to cease existing as a nation” before they become truly “monstrous” (Stump 2011, 185, Stump's italics).

At this point, it would be well to remember that Stump's project is to show that 1 Samuel 15 could be “literally true” in the world of her thought experiment. Whether she can succeed must depend in part on whether we can legitimately expunge the odor of unfair transgenerational punishment from our reading of the text. It is doubtful that this can be done. The Hebrew word at issue (*paqad*) can be, and has been, rendered in different ways: as “punish” in the New Revised Standard Version, as “remember” in the King James Version, as “exact the penalty” in the Jewish Publication Society translation, and as “have made reckoning of” in the Robert Alter translation that Stump prefers. But whichever way this word is rendered, the suggestion that Amalek is being punished for what an earlier generation of Amalekites had done is very strong. To see just how strong this implication is, we must read 1 Samuel 15 together with what Moses tells the people in Deuteronomy 25: 17–19:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God. Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget.

12 For a full explanation of this idea, one should read Stump's recent book-length treatment of the problem of evil (Stump 2010), in which the stipulations that define the world of her thought experiment are embedded in a much larger account.



Here, at the time of Amalek's offense some 400 years previously, Israel is instructed to "remember" and to "blot out" because of what Amalek has just done to "faint and weary" stragglers. The stated reason for waiting so long to do the "blotting out" has nothing to do with future Amalekite transgressions. It has instead to do with the fact that Israel has many other enemies to defeat. Once the Israelites are safely located in the Promise Land, it will be time to remember and repay.

Add to this the fact that transgenerational punishment is commonplace in the Deuteronomistic history,<sup>13</sup> and it is difficult to see how the text can reasonably be interpreted in any other way. God might, of course, have had purposes not mentioned in the text. He might have anticipated future Amalekite transgressions, and might have wanted to prevent them from becoming even worse. But that is irrelevant if we are trying to determine *what the text says* about the reasons for annihilating the Amalekites.

If we are sticking to "the obvious literal meaning," as Stump says we should, we must see this as a clear case in which God intends to punish the children for the sins of the fathers. Unless the world of Stump's thought experiment is farther from the actual world than it is meant to be, that is how people in that world would read this text. If they are not meant to read it this way, then, as Paul Draper points out, the explanation of God's command is "woefully incomplete and seriously misleading" (Draper 2011, 200).

But let us suppose (if only for the sake of argument) that the text does *not* imply retributive punishment. Let us suppose further that Stump is not wrong in thinking that being killed in this way was the best thing for the Amalekites, and that God's purpose for them was indeed a loving one. There is a further question that Stump thinks we need to address. Why would God commission the Israelites to do the killing? Would this not be bad *for them*? Why, for example, should they "risk serious bodily injury or death" in this enterprise? They would not be acting in self-defense, since they are not at war with Amalek at this time. Nor are they to wage war for profit, since they are instructed to kill all the Amalekites' animals. Stump's explanation is that they are to do this *only* for God's sake – "for the sake of being committed to God and enforcing his judgments" (Stump 2011, 191).

Here, at the beginning of their existence as a nation, it may be that God commands them to be the agents of the destruction of the Amalekite people to bring home to them in this drastic way the importance of their relationship to God and the importance of God's judgments, including the divinely ordained practices that distinguish the Israelite people from the surrounding peoples. (Stump 2011, 190)

Perhaps this could be thought of as an important step in the direction of forming a people for union with God?

There is an obvious problem with this suggestion. Would not receiving and obeying such a command be bad for the development the Israelites' character? Would it not be morally corrupting for them to go about the grisly business of hacking into the flesh of women and children and babes? One might have thought so, but Stump offers the following explanation. Moral corruption, she says, "is a matter of making someone morally worse than he otherwise would be" (Stump 2011, 191). Since the ancient Israelites lived in a time in which "unending tribal warfare marked by savage practices" was the rule, she says it is

13 See, for example, 2 Kings 23:26–30, where it appears that King Josiah (the best of Judah's kings) is defeated and killed in battle because the God of Israel was still angry with Josiah's grandfather, King Manassah.



“less clear than it might have seemed initially” that the command to annihilate the Amalekites would have been morally corrupting for the Israelites (Stump 2011, 192).

It might be objected that *God’s* commands ought to be designed to raise such a people above the “savage” level of its time. Stump does not address precisely this point, but it may be that she thinks it would have been reasonable for God to adopt an incremental approach to moral improvement – and that at this early stage of Israel’s history, it would have been improvement enough for the Israelites to learn “the importance of their relationship to God and the importance of God’s judgments.”

As things turned out, however, this particular plan failed and the Israelites did not learn the desired lesson. “. . . [V]ery shortly after the events of this story,” Stump says, “the Israelite people is itself immersed in all the practices God has condemned on the part of the Amalekite people and all the surrounding peoples with whom God also commands the Israelite people to fight” (Stump 2011, 193). She stresses that in the world of her thought experiment God must have known that this particular plan would fail. But she reminds us that in the biblical history of the formation of the Israelite people, God often relies on human agents to do his will, and that many of his plans come to nothing. However, Stump insists that these failures are only temporary and “local,” and that – in a surprising way – they contribute to the success of God’s larger plan to form a “just and loving people” who can be “united with God” (Stump 2011, 195). They do this by showing a people “what will not work to cure them of what needs to be healed in them” (Stump 2011, 194). Sometimes, she explains, “learning what won’t work” is “an essential preliminary in the process of the discovery of what will work and of the willingness to accept it” (Stump 2011, 195–196). At the deepest level, then, the point of commanding the ancient Israelites to be “the agents of the destruction of the Amalekite people” was not to get something done right away. It was rather, in the broad sweep of Israel’s history, to teach her something – to show her “*what will not work to enable a people to become just, good, and loving*,” (Stump 2011, 197, my italics).

But what exactly was it that did not “work” in the case reported in 1 Samuel 15?<sup>14</sup> What *specific* lesson is Israel supposed to learn from this particular failed plan? Stump does not give her reader as much help with this question as one might like, but she provides a hint by framing her discussion of 1 Samuel 15 with references to Benjamin Netanyahu. The final sentence of Stump’s paper suggests that her way of thinking about the story of Samuel and the Amalekites “would be helpful for Benjamin Netanyahu” (Stump 2011, 197). And the title (“The Problem of Evil and the History of Peoples: Think Amalek”) references a *New York Times* interview in which an adviser to Netanyahu explained how seriously the Israeli Prime Minister takes the threat from Iran by saying, “Think Amalek!” (Goldberg 2009). The adviser meant that Netanyahu views Iran as an “existential” threat – one that may eventually call for a military response.

How does Stump think her reflections on this difficult story would be helpful for Netanyahu? It’s hard to be certain, but perhaps she thinks that reading the story her way would make the Israeli Prime Minister see that a violent response to the threat of violence will not help form Israel into a “just, good, and loving” people.<sup>15</sup> If that is right, then Stump

14 The *biblical* answer is that even partial disobedience to God brings disaster (1 Samuel 15:22).

15 This interpretation is strongly suggested by the fact that the concluding paragraph of Stump’s paper (the one that suggests a lesson for Netanyahu) is immediately preceded by this sentence: “In the miserable process of formation through experience, one of the things a people can learn is what will not work to enable a people to become just, good, and loving” (Stump 2011, 197).

may think that *this* is the intended lesson of the “failure” of God’s plan to have Israel annihilate Amalek.

Is commanding Israel to blot out the remembrance of Amalek a good way to teach her such a lesson? One would not have thought so. It is hard to see how instructing a savage people to kill more women and children (this time killing them *for God* and “devoting” them to destruction) could be a good way to teach them or their descendants that violence would not “work” – that it would not make them “just, good, and loving” and would not bring them closer to God. Indeed, one might have thought that it would put the divine imprimatur on extreme violence against those who are thought to be enemies of God and his people.

We can get a bit of confirmation for this conclusion if we consider (however briefly and inadequately) what the Jewish people did in fact learn from the terror texts. Three of the 613 mitzvot gleaned from the Torah deal explicitly with what might be called “the Amalekite problem.” Commandment 59 (in Maimonides’ list of “negative” mitzvot) forbids forgetting “what Amalek did to us.” Commandment 188 (in Maimonides’ list of “positive” mitzvot) mandates the “extermination” of Amalek, “male and female, young and old” (Maimonides and Chavel 1967, 200). And commandment 189 instructs Jews to “remember” and never to weaken in their hatred of Amalek.

We are to speak of this at all times, and to arouse the people to make war upon him and bid them hate him, to the end that this matter be not forgotten and that hatred of him be not weakened or lessened with the passage of time. (Maimonides and Chavel 1967, 202)<sup>16</sup>

The lesson Maimonides took from the terror texts is not one that Stump can be happy with. Nor, I think, should any of us be. Perhaps Stump would say that what the Jewish people have done with this text is itself a temporary and local failure – a misunderstanding that paves the way for global success. But even in the world of her thought experiment, Maimonides’ interpretation of these unpleasant texts would surely be more plausible than one according to which God wanted to teach love and justice and peacemaking by putting his own authority behind the extermination of Amalekite men, women, and children.

## Inscrutable Reasons? Unknown Goods?

Consider, finally, a theist who is not satisfied (or not fully satisfied) by explanations like the ones we have considered and who is unable to think of a better one. If she is a Christian, Alvin Plantinga has some advice for her.

So we are perplexed about those OT [Old Testament] passages: did God really command something like genocide? But then we recall the love revealed in the incarnation and atonement, and we see that whatever God did, he must indeed have a good reason, even if we can’t see what that reason is. (Plantinga 2011, 112–113)

<sup>16</sup> For many Jews, the expression of this “hatred” amounts to little more than using noisemakers to “blot out” the name of Haman during the Feast of Purim. According to tradition, Haman (the villain who plots the murder of the Jews in the book of Esther) was an Amalekite.

Plantinga intends, I think, to leave open several different possibilities. Maybe God really did command the Israelites to exterminate other peoples. Or maybe God did not command exactly that, but did encourage them to pursue warfare vigorously (somewhat as a basketball coach might encourage his team by saying, “Get out there and kill ‘em!’”). Or maybe these passages are to be understood allegorically and are really about spiritual warfare against sin. Each of these possibilities has its problems, and Plantinga does not say which is preferable. But “whatever God did,” he thinks Christians should operate on the assumption that he had a good and loving (though perhaps unknown) reason for doing it.<sup>17</sup>

Let us focus on the first possibility – that these texts give us literal historical truth, and that God really did command the extermination of vast numbers of Canaanites and Amalekites. Is Plantinga’s appeal to good but inscrutable reasons all that is required to handle that possibility? Will it allow theists to read these problematic texts literally and accept what they say with a good conscience?

At this point, it will be useful to consider the contribution of skeptical theists (see Chapter 29). Strictly speaking, skeptical theism is a theistic response to what has come to be called the evidential argument from evil (see Chapter 4). A generic version of this argument may be conveniently summarized as follows:

- (1) If God exists, he would not permit an evil unless his permitting it was necessary for a good great enough to justify him in doing so.<sup>18</sup>
- (2) In the case of very many terrible evils, we are unable (despite our best efforts) to see how God’s permitting them is necessary for any such good.

So, then, a reasonable person should conclude that:

- (3) Some evils are such that God’s permitting them is not necessary for a good great enough to justify him in doing so.

In which case, a reasonable person should also conclude that:

- (4) God does not exist.

Skeptical theists challenge the inference from (2) to (3). They remind us that God’s knowledge and wisdom and power and goodness are far greater than ours. For all we know, they say, God sees goods of which we are wholly unaware. Even with respect to those goods with which we are acquainted, God may see deep connections between those goods and his permission of evils, and these connections may be utterly beyond our ken. So even if there

17 Plantinga also mentions (without at all endorsing) the possibility that Moses and Samuel got it wrong. “Of course these passages don’t specifically add that Moses and Samuel were in fact correct in what they attribute to God – were they perhaps engaging in a little creative hermeneutics of their own?” (Plantinga 2011, 110). I have already given my reasons for thinking that the problem posed by the terror texts cannot be solved by distinguishing sharply between what “the Bible says God commanded” and “what Moses and Samuel said God commanded.” Plantinga may well agree with me about this, since he quickly adds, “But perhaps we are to understand that [Moses and Samuel] were correct,” and then goes on to ask the right question: “Why would a perfectly good God command a thing like that?”

18 “Great good” should be understood throughout to include “the prevention of an equally bad or worse evil.”

were God-justifying goods for the sake of which he must permit all the evils in our world, there is no reason to think we would be able to see just how this is so. Our inability to discern God's reasons does not therefore justify us in concluding that some evils lack a God-justifying connection to some great good.<sup>19</sup>

To see how this might be thought relevant to our worry about the terror texts in the Bible, consider the following partially parallel line of argument.

- (5) If God is perfectly good, he never commands the extermination of one people by another unless there is some great good that he cannot achieve without doing so.
- (6) According to the biblical record, God sometimes commanded the extermination of one people by another.
- (7) We are unable (despite our best efforts) to discover any great good that God could not achieve without issuing these commands.

So, then, a reasonable person should conclude that:

- (8) There is no such good.

In which case, a reasonable person should also conclude that:

- (9) If God is perfectly good, then the biblical record sometimes misrepresents him.

Where, if at all, does this argument go wrong? Well, if the skeptical theists' reasons for rejecting the move from (2) to (3) in the evidential argument from evil are sound, then perhaps similar reasons can be given for rejecting the move from (7) to (8) in this new argument. The thought would be that our grasp of the space of God-justifying reasons is far too sketchy to warrant either inference.

Does this get theists who believe both that a perfectly good God once commanded "something like genocide" out of trouble? It is not immediately clear that it does. As I suggested earlier, those who think we should reject the terror texts may be as worried by the biblical rationale for these terrifying commands as they are by the commands themselves. They are less concerned by what they *do not see* than by what they *do see*; and what they quite clearly see is that the official biblical rationale for commanding "something like genocide" is inadequate at best, and perverse at worst.<sup>20</sup> It is *wrong* to kill Canaanite women in order to prevent Israelite men from marrying them. It is *wrong* to punish the Amalekites for the sins of their ancestors. And it is downright *bad* for the moral and spiritual development of any people to wage an extermination campaign against another people.

But if it is granted that the terror texts give *bad* reasons for God's commanding "something like genocide," then (7) can be replaced with

- (7') We see that the biblical rationale for these commands is very poor.

19 This quick summary does not do justice to the complexity of the issues surrounding evidential arguments from evil, nor to the various flavors of skeptical theism. But I think it is all we need for present purposes.

20 See Curley (2011).

Now there is no need to make a detour through (8) or to make any other inference parallel to the one attacked by skeptical theists. From (7'), a reasonable person should move straight to:

(9) If God is perfectly good, then the biblical record sometimes misrepresents him.

This is far from the end of the matter, however. Some skeptical theists are unwilling to accept (7'). What we clearly see, they say, is not that the biblical rationale for "something like genocide" is *bad*, but merely that it is not *complete*. To show how this might be so, Mark Murphy offers a humble analogy:

I am preparing dinner for an old college friend whom I haven't seen in twenty years and with whom friendly relations uneasily fell apart for stupid reasons; my 3-year-old child wants to play. He is tugging at my pants leg. "Why can't you play?" "I'm making dinner for a friend." What I say is true. But given a philosopher to represent his interests, my son could argue that this reason could be satisfied in two minutes by putting frozen chicken nuggets and french fries into the oven, leaving ample time for play. But what more should I say, or what should I have said instead? Should I try to explain in detail why I am spending the time that I am spending – not just throwing frozen food into the oven, but painstakingly working on a meal that will evoke memories of our earlier years and better times shared, perhaps to help repair the break but at least to ease any resentment that might remain over the falling out – to a 3-year-old? Is he going to get it? No. But "I'm making dinner for a friend" is true and puts him on the right track. (Murphy 2011, 156, note 14)

Murphy's point, I take it, is that we are to God somewhat as his three-year-old is to him. God can tell us a bit about his reasons for commanding the extermination of a people, and this bit may put us "on the right track." But given our cognitive limitations, God may not be able to tell us in detail why he issued these commands in precisely these circumstances.

Is it plausible to say that the biblical accounts of God's reasons for commanding "something like genocide" put us "on the right track?" I am not sure it is. One obvious worry about Murphy's suggestion is that it would undercut our *moral grounds* for rejecting reports of new "divine commands" mandating terror. To see this, recall the imaginary Pastor who tells his congregants that they have been commissioned by God to remove the danger of a terrible spiritual infection by killing a number of atheists. One would not expect sensible folk to waste much time trying to decide whether his "revelation" is genuine. They would see that both the command and the reason given for it are preposterous, and this would be at least partly because they fail to satisfy our *moral criteria* for a genuine revelation. In the absence of a counterbalancing reason for believing the "message" to be genuine, they would reject it.

And (I say) they are right to apply this test. But on the ground marked out by Murphy, it might seem that they are not. After all, the Pastor can only report what God tells him; and what God can tell him is limited by our human capacity to understand. For all we know, the danger of spiritual infection by these atheists is a perfectly good reason for God to command us to kill them. If it looks bad to us, that is because it is only part of a much larger story. Given our profound cognitive limitations, God cannot tell us the whole story – he cannot give us *all* his excellent reasons for commanding us to kill those atheists. The best he can do is to put us "on the right track" by telling us just this bit of the story.

Such a high degree of skepticism about what God might command is surely excessive. The immoral content of the pastor's "revelation" is a perfectly good reason to reject it. This reason is, of course, defeasible, but in the absence of overriding evidence confirming the veridicality of the pastor's "message from God," we should regard it as a matter for the police.<sup>21</sup>

I suggest that we should approach the terror texts in the Bible in somewhat the same way. By our best lights, they are morally subpar, and this gives us a strong *prima facie* reason for believing that they do not accurately depict the commands of a good and loving God. This reason is defeasible, but *unless* overriding reasons for accepting the terror texts can be produced, they should be rejected.

## Acknowledgment

Thanks to Andrew Cullison and Blake Roeber for their helpful comments and criticism.

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21 I see no reason in principle why those who deploy skeptical theism *against the evidential argument from evil* could not consistently accept a moral test for the genuineness of a revelation. Nor do I see why they could not consistently reject the terror texts on moral grounds. If it is said that God would not allow serious moral errors in Scripture, a skeptical theist could reply that for all we know, God has very good but unknown reasons for permitting such errors in Scripture. If some (most?) skeptical theists are reluctant to deal with the problem in this way, it is for reasons that have nothing to do with skeptical theism.

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# God Because of Evil: A Pragmatic Argument from Evil for Belief in God

MARILYN McCORD ADAMS

## The Argument

I want to mount an *ad hominem* argument from evil for belief in God. My principal targets are *atheists* and *agnostics* who are *optimistic* and *purpose driven*, but who nevertheless insist that our worldviews and life projects should be *realistic*, most especially that they should reckon with empirical facts. Some such atheists and agnostics insist that realism rules out religious belief as irrational, because modern science has closed the explanatory gaps that a deity was supposed to fill. With others, realism focuses on evil to ground the familiar theoretical argument against the existence of God.<sup>1</sup> My response is that the latter are hoist on their own petard, because realism about evil is incompatible with such purpose-driven optimism unless it is undergirded by belief in God.

## Entrenched Practices and Attitudes

My argument takes off from purpose-driven optimism, from *the entrenched practice* of trying to organize one's activities and efforts around worthwhile goals and experiences so as to make a life for oneself that is rich in positive meaning, and from *an entrenched attitude*

1 Roughly speaking, the theoretical atheological argument goes as follows: God is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. If God existed and were omnipotent, God would be able to prevent or eliminate any and all evils if God wanted to. If God existed and were omniscient, God would have the knowledge required to prevent or eliminate any and all evils. If God existed and were perfectly good, God would want to prevent or eliminate any and all evils that God could. Therefore, if God existed and were omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, God would prevent or eliminate all evils. But evils exist. Therefore, God does not. Note: the claim that God is essentially omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good is taken to mean that it is impossible for God to exist and lack those perfections. So the existence of evil is taken to prove not that God exists but lacks those perfections, but that God does not exist at all.



of *hopefulness* that expects a sufficient measure of success to make life – if not highly satisfying – at least decidedly worth living. Meaning-making, trying to make positive sense out of life, is an *entrenched* activity for all human beings, because it is an *essential* function of persons. Because human beings are by nature *personal* animals, normal human beings have a strong propensity to adopt goals and pursue them, as well as a naturally and culturally fostered tendency to integrate these into some sort of life plan. Human beings also have a natural bias toward hopefulness (“hope springs eternal!”). Once we emerge from infancy enough to be aware of what our natural functions are, other things being equal, we come to expect them “always or for the most part” to work. Of course, other things are not always equal. Human natural propensities and tendencies can be obstructed by physiological damage or biochemical imbalances within the organism, as well as by external factors. As persons, human beings also have varying powers deliberately to suppress or control natural propensities and tendencies (as when an ascetic denies himself food or sleep or sexual gratification, or when a soldier in battle overcomes her fear and stays on the front line). Native human optimism and drive for meaning find different degrees of expression in different individuals. My principal targets are people who pursue purposeful lives with gusto, who persevere in the face of obstacles, who do so with zeal and commitment that expects a good measure of success. But my aim is broader, at anyone who keeps on trying. A sunny disposition is not required!

## Realism

When atheists and agnostics urge fellow humans to be realistic, what they mean is not always clear. Some (e.g., Dawkins 2006) insist that the scientific method (with its empirical observations and repeatable experiments) is the gold standard for theorizing. Forwarding the controversial thesis that scientific and philosophical explanations must be of the same type, they argue that scientific estimates of reality make no room for God. When it comes to meaning-making, however, theory interacts with practice. One doubts very much that scientific method has guided, that it could or should direct all of their life choices and projects (say, of whom to marry or whether to immigrate to a foreign land).

My argument gives targeted atheists and agnostics the benefit of the doubt and takes them to be subscribing to a more modest “folk realism,” which rigorously prioritizes forming beliefs, framing life policies and projects in the face of the facts. Such realism is meant to govern attitudes and practices, from the trivial to the momentous. If we do not want to get wet, we should heed the weather forecast and take an umbrella. If the music teacher diagnoses us as tone-deaf, we should not attempt to become a concert pianist. If the doctor gives us a month to live, we should not spend it detailing our personal five-year plan. If fossil fuels are going to run out soon, we (collectively) should not delay the development of alternative energy sources.

When I propose to argue *ad hominem*, I do not mean that I plan to take as premises propositions that the atheist takes as true but that I – for my own part – reject as false. I am not arguing, “even your own false beliefs entail the existence of God.” Instead, I am targeting people with certain entrenched practices, attitudes, and commitments. I expect my argument to have effect (if any) only among people who strike a certain life posture. For the record, I, too, am realistic yet optimistic and purpose driven. My contention is that – given the way the world really is – it makes no sense to meet life this way apart from belief in God.

## Horrendous Evils

Atheological arguments from evil (such as that offered by Mackie 1955) are out to compel theists to “get real” about the evils in our world and their implications. My countercontention is that most parties to that dispute have not been realistic enough (M.M. Adams 1999, 1–55). Robust realism requires more than the observation that our world is full of evils many and great (as well as trivial and minuscule); that pain and suffering may be instrumentally ordered to individual or species goods; that they are regularly consequent on natural causes and human choices and the (accidental or purposeful) intersection of the two; that in human life, “you have to take the bitter with the sweet.” *Robust realism demands confrontation with the horrendous, with the fact that our world is incessantly productive of evils of the prima facie life-ruining kind.*

For the sake of argument, let me define “horrors” as “evils participation in the doing or suffering of which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole.” Dramatic examples include the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psychophysical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, cannibalizing one’s own offspring, participation in the Nazi death camps, and the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas. More “domestic” horrors are found in corporate cultures of dishonesty co-opting workers into betraying their deepest values, parental incest, school-ground bullying, being the accidental and/or unwitting agent in the disfigurement or death of those one loves the most, schizophrenia and severe clinical depression, and degenerative conditions such as Alzheimer’s and multiple sclerosis that unravel and/or imprison the person we once knew.

Participation in horrors furnishes reason to doubt whether the participant’s life can be worth living, because it engulfs the positive value of her/his life and penetrates into his/her meaning-making structures seemingly to defeat and degrade her/his value as a person. The father who non-negligently and accidentally runs over the little son who has been the light of his life, reasonably wonders who he can be now, how he can go on, do anything more than survive. Incest socially disorients its victims, covers them with shame and self-loathing, torments them with doubts about what they did wrong to bring on such treatment, or why they are so worthless that others did not step in to protect them. Depression robs life of its flavor, prevents those who suffer it from *experiencing* anything around them as good. Soldiers and civilians traumatized by war lose their ability to order their lives into a coherent narrative, as the horrors interrupt to terrorize and terrify them again and again.

Unlike trivial, small, medium, and large evils, horrors are disproportioned to human agency. (1) *Horrendous evils unavoidably exceed our powers of conception.* Where evils are concerned, our capacity to conceive follows our capacity to experience. But human propensity to be salient members of causal chains leading to horrors outruns our capacity for experiencing them: *quantitatively*, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot did not live long enough to experience *seriatim* suffering of the sort they caused; *qualitatively*, hardened soldiers and teenage youths cannot experience anything like enough to a mother’s anguish at seeing her child thrown into a burning ditch or tossed on bayonets. It follows that horror producers usually do not fully appreciate *what is bad about the horrors or how bad they are, and so in some residual sense “know not what they do.”*

(2) *No amount of prudence and caution guarantees we will avoid them.* It is comparatively easy to be salient members in causal chains leading to horrors. Contributing to horror perpetration is not tightly correlated with moral guilt or innocence. In a world such as this, not only do bad things happen to good people, morally innocent people sometimes perpetrate horrors on others, even those they love the most. Often accidents, ignorance, and/or (what would otherwise be) minor negligence spawn unanticipated horrors (as when a moment's inattention behind the wheel turns an Olympic trial athlete into a paraplegic). Just being in the wrong place at the wrong time can make us horror participants (like the shoppers who dashed into the supermarket moments before the suicide bomber blew herself up, like Americans who happened to be visiting relatives in Hiroshima when the A-bomb fell).

(3) *Horrors are so bad that there is nothing we can do to set them right.* If a stunning museum exhibit can balance off an awkward and uncomfortable medical test, there is no package of merely created goods that can compensate for horror participation. How many holocaust survivor stories tell of ingenuity to escape, resourcefulness to build a successful career, initiative to remarry and reproduce children, all swallowed up in emptiness because of an incapacity to trust enough to forge real personal attachments? (See William Styron's (1979) *Sophie's Choice* and Aharon Appelfeld's (1988) *The Immortal Bartfuss* – true-to-life fictions that vividly portray the real-life experience of thousands.)

Horrors cannot be made meaningful by structures of *retributive justice*, because justice is a matter of proportion. Horror for horror (e.g., torturing and beheading those who have tortured and beheaded) might fit the crime, but it does not fit the agent whose capacity for personal integrity it *prima facie* destroys. Horrors are too bad to be used in moral education, to teach someone a lesson. What *prima facie* ruins a person's life by stalemating his/her meaning-making capacities brings positive moral development to a halt. In any event, horror for horror only multiplies the horrors and so fails to make the world a better place.

Robust realism demands that we face horrors and their consequences. For present purposes, it is not necessary to "get technical," although physical and social scientific studies in academic books and journals should sober professionals. For my *ad hominem* argument, a popularized sketch will be sufficient to show how – in the world as we know it – horrors infest human lives.

(1) *Human beings in this world are radically vulnerable to and inevitably complicit in horrors.* Horrors are not unusual. The holocaust in Nazi Germany was horrendous, and it was all-too-quickly followed by genocide in Serbo-Croatia, Rwanda, and Darfur. The slaughter bench of history is riddled with horrors. The books of Joshua and Ezra show how genocide and ethnic cleansing have been standard *modus operandi* among competing groups at least since biblical times.

(2) *Horrors attack on the inside when they traumatize, distort, or destroy the individual's psychological capacities for meaning-making.* In conversation, one leading psychologist said of Cambodian refugees from the killing fields, "Oh, we don't try to get them to remember and integrate their experiences into a coherent narrative. We are only trying to teach them techniques and strategies that will help them get through the day!" Other horror participants may be able to analyze, scan, and try on different interpretations and scenarios. But brain chemistry skews their calculations to turn their life-strategies bizarre (as with the paranoid schizophrenic who sees conspiracies around every corner and behind every face). Or cost-benefit analyses become pointless, because depression keeps them from experiencing anything as good or worth having.

(3) *Horrors attack on the outside when they threaten or destroy the social framework within whose roles we find much of our reason for being, and/or when they significantly change the material environment presupposed by those ways of being in the world.* Think of Amazon-dwellers whose way of life is destroyed when American companies clear the jungle to get possession of its natural resources. What about white southerners in the wake of reconstruction (cf. *Gone with the Wind*), their genteel way of being in the world forever destroyed? Or party-line Marxist philosophers in East German universities, when the Berlin wall came down and the Soviet Union fell apart? Those professors were not simply out of a job. Like the past regime, their whole creative output was discredited as not only mistaken but pernicious.

Quite apart from revolutions and political upheaval, social systems double-bind us for horrors, because all humanly devised social systems spawn systemic evils (e.g., racism, classism, xenophobia, and homophobia), preferential structures of cruelty which privilege some while degrading others. Either we successfully perform the roles assigned to us and so become complicit in systemic horrors by defining who we are (I am a lawyer, a doctor, a stockbroker, a policeman, a cattle rancher, a strawberry grower) partly in terms of unjust social structures. Or our lives acquire negative meaning (society counts us “no good” or “traitorous”) because we fail to live into those social roles and contribute what society expects of us (e.g., sixties hippy dropouts, the homeless on our streets, repeat-offender drug-dealing felons, or terrorists).

Robust realism requires us to face the fact that human radical vulnerability to horrors in this world is not superficial or accidental, but to be expected given what human beings are and what the material world is.

Popular science tells us that the universe began as a material “soup,” which over millions of years interacted to evolve material structures that could host life, eventually macro plant and animal life, even human life. But *the life thus hosted is neither permanent nor self-sustaining*. Life-hosting material structures are vulnerable to destruction by a variety of natural forces. Just as complex material structures evolve by cannibalizing simpler ones, so – while they last – plants and animals live by consuming (and hence destroying) something else.

Because human beings are personal animals, material persons, *humans inherit (what we may call for short) “Darwinian” motivational tendencies*. Animal nature builds in an instinct for life that drives the animal to do anything to secure it. Animal nature also builds in the inevitability of death, which makes the drive for individual and species preservation desperate. Played out in an environment of scarcity, these spawn the proverbial struggle for existence in which only the fittest survive.

Moreover, *psyche mirrors biology. Human psychological capacities are neither permanent nor self-sustaining*. Human being ties personality to an animal developmental life cycle. If prolonged dependence on adult caretakers is what it takes to grow our superior human brains, it also leaves us for years at the mercy of at best neurotic adults who evoke and decisively shape our personalities. The process of psychological development is extremely fragile and can be easily interrupted and distorted in ways that mark us for life. *Human psychic capacities are insufficient to personify material structures permanently*, as death and *ante-mortem* dementia show.

Importantly, *humans are also socially Darwinian. Humanly devised social systems are not permanent or self-sustaining either*. Civilizations and empires rise, go through periods of energy and creativity, but eventually wear out, crumble, and/or succumb to conquest. Limited intelligence combines with Darwinian drives to mean that all humanly devised

social systems spawn systemic evils, give rise to structures that are insidiously preferential and degrade human beings. To be sure, ethics and mores attempt to mold individuals into useful citizens by fostering cardinal and other virtues. But these turn out to be *only localized virtues* that hedge against tendencies to “in-group” harms in ordinary time, that bias us against unwanted interference with preferred fellow citizens on whose cooperation we depend. Such virtues do not reliably hold people back when governments urge ethnic cleansing (as in Nazi Germany, Serbia, Rwanda, and Darfur). Nor are localized ordinary-time virtues usually strong enough to keep citizens from defaulting to “everyone for themselves” in natural disasters (remember armed vigilantes at the bridge, keeping people from crossing out of New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina) (R.M. Adams 2006; Waller 2007; Taylor 2009).

Since societies are always in a position of competing with one another for scarce resources, *high cultural goals and achievements are built on the underbelly readiness to go to war to defend our way of life, on the willingness to perpetrate horrors on enemies*. Military codes of conduct and “just” war theory can be accurately redescribed as instruments of *bestiality containment*: war guarantees that we will engage in, or demand our soldiers to perpetrate horrors on other human beings. We rise above the beasts in their Darwinian struggle, when we resolve to commit atrocities only as allowed by the Geneva conventions.

Millions of human beings participate in horrors as individual perpetrators or victims. The millions more who manage to avoid such individual participation otherwise by withdrawing from society to become hermits are socially complicit in horrors twice over.

People who identify themselves in terms of their social roles, who devise goals and purposes within their social frame, are complicit in the systemic evils to which their social system gives rise. The positive meaning I have struggled to win through professional success is undermined by the horror of privileged access that degrades other people by counting them unworthy of such opportunities. The positive meaning that middle-class Americans work so hard for – the enjoyment of a comfortable life with lovely homes and fine clothes and excellent schools, two kids and a dog, the means to buy gourmet coffees and ice creams, chocolates and peanut butters – is eroded by the horrendous conditions of brutally treated farm laborers who harvest our food and sweatshop workers who make our clothes.

Even minimalists, who so much as live in society and accept the advantages of its infrastructures (e.g., working utilities, police, and fire protection), are complicit in the systemic injustice that *de facto* counts some people within the society as not worth protecting.

However much citizens work for a just society, to whatever extent they turn social resources toward economic prosperity and high cultural achievements, human societies persistently fall short of universal human sympathy. To the extent that society is willing to go to war to defend its way of life and so to perpetrate and to require their soldiers to perpetrate horrors on others, all of these meaning-making attempts by citizens are subverted by their complicity in the horrors of war and in society’s failure to honor the personal worth of every human being.

### ***Ad Hominem* Argument, Asserted**

Robust realism requires us to face up to the fact that humans are radically vulnerable to and inevitably complicit in horrors. But horrors are *prima facie* life ruinous: participation

in them *prima facie* defeats the possibility of positive meaning within the participant's life. Universal human horror-participation makes optimism irrational, and the attempt to secure lives of positive meaning futile, unless our horror-infested world includes a horror defeater, an agency powerful and resourceful, ready, willing, and able enough to make good on horrors, not only in the world as a whole but within the context of the individual horror participants' lives. There is much more to be said about what could fill the horror-defeating role (some of which I defer to the penultimate section). For now, I indicate the direction of my argument by echoing Aquinas in the Five Ways: "and this is what everyone calls 'God!'" (*Summa Theologica* I, q.2, a.3 c.)

Horrors force atheists and agnostics who are purpose-driven optimists yet committed to being realistic, to make some life-posture choices. They can either try to uproot entrenched practices (of meaning-making), attitudes (of hopefulness), and commitments (to forming policies in the face of the facts). Or they can conclude that a horror defeater is necessary to make sense of their entrenched way of life.

## Nontheistic Alternatives

Doubtless, the optimistic yet realistic, purpose-driven atheist will respond, "not so fast!" Surely, a realistic estimate of horrors leaves atheists and agnostics with more life-posture alternatives than converting to theism or giving up in despair.

To be honest, I have to agree. Earlier (in the second section), I identified meaning-making as an entrenched, even natural function of personal animals, and hope as an entrenched attitude. Evolutionary theory suggests that such propensities are natural, because they have survival value. Where humans are concerned, organizing life around goals and purposes, attempting to make sense of situations, confidence in the possibility of doing so, promotes longevity. Track records of effective coping are plausible good-making features in candidate mates.

Evolutionary roots should caution us against exaggeration. The kind of realism that has survival value is not Cliffordian. That is, it does not require the discipline of never believing anything on insufficient evidence. It is not even necessary that our picture of the world be true. What is required is cognitive modeling that fits our neighborhood well enough to enable us to negotiate its obstacles successfully and secure what we need. Limited cognitive capacity means that *our attention is necessarily selective*. Human meaning-making cannot help working with incomplete information. Call the realism that has survival value "Darwinian" realism. Darwinian realism falls short of robust realism that requires us to look horrors in the face.

Likewise, the kind of meaning-making that enables us to survive, reproduce, and rear offspring, is contextual. Working to become an excellent carpenter or skilled hunter may become an organizing principle of human life, give people a sense of positive meaning insofar as they contribute to communal welfare, even if they are complicit in the horrors that their clan perpetrates on the neighbors when defending and seizing turf. *Local and surface meanings* are what have survival value, and this will be true even if the meaning-making schemes float on a cesspool of horrors and/or lack a solid metaphysical foundation.

Taking the evolutionary perspective seems to widen the range of options. Convinced atheists and genuine agnostics might carry on with a less-than-robust qualified realism,



might get on with life by not uprooting but dampening hopes and curtailing meaning-making objectives.

Many good and decent people have fruitful and enjoyable lives because they “abstract” from the possibility of horrors happening to them. They adopt a policy of “avoiding unpleasantness.” They need not be Pollyanna’s (“God’s in his heaven! All’s right with the world!”). They may roll up their sleeves and work their way around small, medium, even largish obstacles. They may even know about horrors in the abstract. But their effort is to avoid engaging horrors concretely, even from a second- or third-person perspective. Whenever there are rumors of horrors, they do not pursue them. They are careful about what they read and which movies they see. Their European vacations do not include tours of Nazi death camps. They never ask returning soldiers what it was really like in Abu Ghraib. They do not inquire under what conditions their clothes were made in Indonesia. In general, they do not ponder their complicity in the systemic horrors to which their society and economy give rise. Overall, they simply do not take horrors into account in their meaning-making calculations. If they are lucky, horrors may not appear to impinge on their individual lives, and they are the happier for it. Could not convinced atheists and genuine agnostics also hope to be lucky? Would not qualified realism, one that lowers its aim to local and surface meanings, allow them to get on with their purpose-driven lives?

For many other atheists and agnostics, commitment to a more nearly robust realism, one that outruns Darwinian realism, may be too entrenched. Horrors – once pointed out – may be too obvious for “denial” or abstracted meanings to work for them. Certainly, horrors without a horror defeater undermine hope. But several famous unbelievers have insisted, it would not have to bring meaning-making to an end altogether.

### *Rebelling with Camus*

In *The Rebel* and other novels and plays (Camus 1956; 1970; 1972; 1991), Albert Camus reckons on a world without God and urges us to rebel against the basic conditions of our existence. The world is hostile. Nature is inhospitable. History is a slaughter bench. By living in society, we are all complicit in the death of other human beings. Robust realism demands that we abandon hope that these could ever change. Nevertheless, rebels are not to conclude that all is *absurd*, that there are no values, or that human life is meaningless. By their very rebellion, they insist on the sacred worth – in Camus’ estimate, the immeasurable value – of persons. Rebels protest the basic conditions of our existence, not only in words and symbolic action, but by spending themselves to the point of exhaustion, fighting to protect human life, to prevent death and horrors, even though they know in advance that they will gain scant ground before they succumb themselves (like Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*). Incessant acted protest against death and horrors is also the most we can do in life to atone for our complicity in the destruction of other human beings, a debt that we pay in full only by dying ourselves. For Camus, the rebel’s life can be purpose driven, because it is organized around genuine values. Camus’ rallying call can even stir a flicker of hope to be a faithful witness and to win some small and local, temporary and transient victories.

### *Russell’s stoicism*

In his essay “A Free Man’s Worship” (Russell 1957), Bertrand Russell also begins with what he takes to be robust realism. Human existence is imbedded in an impersonal and purposeless

material world that gave rise to humankind by accident and will ultimately destroy humankind and all of its achievements. Russell declares that the appropriate response to this is “unyielding despair” (Russell 1957, 45–46). Nevertheless, we – robust realism about horrors would qualify, “some of us” – have the brief span of our lives to work with, and we have a certain freedom about how to conduct ourselves, a freedom that allows us briefly to transcend the impersonal and purposeless world. The way forward is to “preserve our respect for truth, beauty, for the ideal of perfection which life does not permit us to attain” and “to live constantly with that vision before us” (Russell 1957, 48). According to Russell, Promethean defiance or rebellion is not a wholesome response to a world in which our ideals cannot be realized. The posture of defiance, he warns, “keeps evil always in view and always actively hated.” As a result, rebellion puts our thoughts in bondage by compelling them “to be occupied with an evil world” (Russell 1957, 48). Moreover, “in the fierceness of desire from which rebellion springs” – namely, the demand that goods should be secured and ideals realized – “there is a kind of self-assertion which it is necessary for the wise to overcome” (Russell 1957, 49–50). By contrast, stoic freedom comes from renunciation of such desires and demands: Russell even speaks of a death of the soul as the subject of such hopes. “[R]esigning ourselves to the outward rule of Fate” frees our thoughts to find beauty in human tragedy (Russell 1957, 50–51). Detachment plus recognition of our “common doom” disposes us to regard our fellow human beings with tolerance and understanding, to relate to them with sympathetic encouragement and the resolve – so far as possible – to do them no harm (Russell 1957, 53–54). Thus, for Russell, realism and renunciation make room for the dignity of freed thinking, for creative meaning-making and benevolence. Russell’s hope that we might achieve this, despite the way the world is, abstracts from human complicity in systemic horror. Perhaps he counts that among the externals to which we must resign ourselves.

### *Nagel’s irony*

In his essay “The Absurd” (Nagel 1979, 11–23), Thomas Nagel relocates our sometime sense of the absurdity of human life by tracing it to three facts. First, human beings engage in belief-forming and meaning-making practices that are entrenched. Both practices involve giving justifications for why we think a claim is credible or goals and activities worth pursuing. In both, justifications come to an end: there are points at which we press our “why-should-we?” demands, and we routinely reach points at which we pursue them no further (Nagel 1979, 12–13, 18–19). Second, viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, these stopping points are arbitrary. The practices in which we engage are not susceptible of noncircular justification, and so are open to skeptical doubts: are our belief-forming practices truth-producing? Do our purposes and projects, the concrete lives that we take so seriously, really matter? Where our ultimate concerns and standards are concerned, “[w]e adhere to them because of the way we are put together: what seems to us important or serious or valuable would not seem so if we were differently constituted” (Nagel 1979, 17–18). Third, human beings have a special capacity not shared by mice and bats to step back and survey ourselves and the lives to which we are committed “with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand” and to recognize what we do as “arbitrary” and “open to doubt” (Nagel 1979, 15). Nagel concludes, we sense the absurdity of our predicament when we take the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective “without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded” (Nagel 1979, 15). For Nagel, the



collision is not between human practices and some feature of the world that we might wish otherwise, because “[t]here does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unseizable doubts could not arise” (Nagel 1979, 17). Rather, the clash is “between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary or open to doubt” (Nagel 1979, 13–14).

These two inescapable view-points collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them. (Nagel 1979, 14)

What should be our response to this bifocal take on human life? Nagel thinks we should not resent or try to escape it, because it “results from the ability to understand our human limitations.” Nor should we indulge ourselves in “a defiant contempt of fate” because such “dramatics” “betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation.” “If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either” (Nagel 1979, 23). Instead, Nagel finds our double take on human life both “sobering and comical” (Nagel 1979, 15). Regarding our belief-forming practices, Nagel wryly comments,

we return to our familiar convictions with a certain irony and resignation. Unable to abandon the natural responses on which they depend, we take them back, like a spouse who has run off with someone else and then decided to return; but we regard them differently (not that the new attitude is necessarily inferior to the old in either case). (Nagel 1979, 19–20)

Likewise, with our meaning-making practices:

after we have put in question the seriousness with which we take our lives and human life in general and have looked at ourselves without presuppositions. We then return to our lives, as we must, but our seriousness is laced with irony. (Nagel 1979, 20)

In Nagel’s cool and urbane estimate, realism ought to infuse purpose-driven optimism with irony. Recalling Russell, Nagel might have further concluded that omnipresent and irrefutable skeptical doubts ought to foster humility about our beliefs and life projects, as well as tolerance towards others.

I have been arguing *ad hominem* that robust realism about horrors should maneuver optimistic purpose-driven atheists and agnostics into a life posture shift. Which shift would depend on life situations and patterns of entrenchment. The atheist or agnostic who is only complicit in horrors, whose concrete engagement of horrors is only second or third person, can afford to be philosophical, take time to try on for size and test the feasibility of the reviewed options.

By contrast, individual horror-participation crashes through to create a posture-shifting emergency – one that (at least temporarily) takes the four atheistic options off the table. Individual horror participation would make it too late to avoid unpleasantness and – in most cases – impossible simply to bracket horrors in practical calculations. Camus’ rebellion, Russell’s stoicism, and Nagel’s irony all assume that the individual’s meaning-making faculties are intact, capable of robust and subtle maneuvers. But individual horror participation not only dampens, but dashes hopes. It shatters meaning-making faculties or at least

stalemates attempts to make positive sense of the participant's life. Individual horror participants would find it hard to manage the calm of Nagel's irony and would see life as more nearly tragic than comical. In all but the spiritually advanced, individual horror participation would undo Russellian resignation. The vast majority of individual horror participants would find their own personal ruin, not beautiful, but ghastly.

Put otherwise, individual horror participation draws people down deeper into their attachments, making it at least temporarily impossible for them to take the *sub specie aeternitatis* point of view. The father who accidentally and non-negligently runs over his little son, will be consumed by his sense of having betrayed personal loyalties, will reject as obscene attempts to portray the event as a beautiful tragedy. Eventually, the father might imitate Camus' rebellion with its workaholic efforts to atone for our complicity in horrors. Likewise, the posttraumatic-stressed soldier who watched his buddies get blown to smithereens. His ability to narrate his life has been exploded, not only because of his particular attachment to his comrades, but also because of his primal identification with them as human beings. PTS victims experience life, not as comical, but as nightmarish, cruel, and dangerous. Individual horror participation might also make belief in God psychologically impossible. Atheists and agnostics who remain only complicit in horrors still have options. Part of what makes individual horror participation so awful is that it puts all of these alternatives *prima facie* out of reach.

Someone might agree with this, but protest that to bring up individual horror participants is to change the subject. They are not optimistic. They are no longer in a position to organize their whole lives around a positive purpose. Therefore, they do not number among my announced targets. Of course, my *ad hominem* argument will get no purchase with them!

My reason for reminding the reader of the individual horror participants' predicament is not to insist that realists should *adopt* their viewpoint. We all know how personal crises can monopolize attention and shatter perspective. Rather, my first point is that robust realism requires the purpose-driven optimist to enter into their way of experiencing the situation sympathetically long enough to get a feel for what it is, because this is an important second-hand measure of how bad horrors are for individual horror participants.

My second point is that the realistic purpose-driven optimist dampens hope, if s/he restricts its scope to people fortunate enough to escape individual horror-participation. Darwinian optimism holds out hope only for the lucky and fittest. But even Darwinians agree that nature builds in a weak tendency to sympathize with all members of the human species. Some realistic purpose-driven optimists may find this tendency strengthened in themselves and realize that their entrenched hope has wider scope, verging on robust optimism. Robust optimism demands a picture that holds out hope even, indeed especially, for people whose lives have been twisted or shattered by horrors. Robust optimism requires an outlook that allows the fortunate to hope on behalf of horror participants, even when that posture is not psychologically possible for the horror participants themselves.

### Personality, How Fundamental?

Robust realism forces us to face the incongruities of human meaning-making. For Nagel, absurdity lies in the fact that entrenched cognitive and meaning-making practices are, and are ever recognizable by us as being open to skeptical doubts. Without disagreeing, I join

Russell and Camus in focusing on the misfit between human personality and a hostile world. For Russell, the cosmos is not personal and purposeful. The material world has given rise to us by accident and will eventually destroy not only human individuals, but the whole human race. For Camus, the sacred value of human life is given, but equally given are the cosmic forces that violate the sacred and our own unavoidable complicity in homicide. My own diagnosis is that the misfit runs right through us as material persons, and is worsened by our situation in a material world of real and apparent scarcity. All four of the nontheistic approaches try to face up to the basic conditions of human existence while salvaging something of the personal at the same time.

A fifth life posture proposal charges that this is a mistake. What could be more obvious? Our world without a horror defeater is a world in which personal functioning is self-defeating. Our conclusion should be that personality is not something to be preserved, but something to get beyond. Suffering occurs because of our personal attachments to and entanglements with the material world. So far as spiritual exercises are concerned, Russellian detachment is a good first step. Some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism urge us to go further. If we insist on having a life-purpose, we should aim at the dissolution of the individual ego, which is the personal center of thought and desire (cf. Nagel 1979, 22). As we let go of the illusion that we are something really distinct from everything else, we will find ourselves swelling with compassion towards all things, and filled, not so much with hope (which remains personal purpose driven), but with peace.

This brings us to a fundamental issue to be faced in adjusting life postures to grapple with horrors. Is our world impersonal at bottom, exhausted by “atoms and the void” and electrical ooze? Or are persons fundamental, as well or instead? Russell references a naturalistic viewpoint according to which the world is material and impersonal at bottom, while human being is only accidental and human life fleeing and ephemeral. Philosophical Hinduisms count the world of our experience, with its multiplicity of things and changes, as an illusion, and maintain that everything is at bottom One. Some Buddhisms think that nothing at all lies behind the illusion and urge that it is into nothing that we should dissolve.

Biblical religion takes the polar opposite position: God is the heart of reality, and God is personal. Because God is personal, God is a meaning-maker. When God makes the material world, God wants it to mean something and so fashions it toward a purpose. But God is not satisfied for creation to mean something “from the outside” by virtue of meanings imposed by Divine providence. God wants it to mean something from the inside. That’s one reason God allows material stuff to evolve structures that can support personal life. God wants human beings to make sense of God’s world, of material stuff, not least by trying to give positive meaning to themselves as material persons, to make good sense of their individual and social lives. More than that, the God of biblical religion wants to collaborate with human persons to endow human life and its cosmic setting with positive meaning.

Thus, for biblical religion, persons are metaphysically fundamental, and human meaning-making figures centrally in God’s plans for creation. If God created human beings to exercise their central function, God must want human meaning-making to be successful. An All-Wise God would anticipate the obstacles – notably, would see how horrors *prima facie* defeat the possibility of positive meaning for material persons in a world such as this. Supreme Wisdom would not start anything It could not finish, and Omnipotence can finish anything It starts. Divine follow-through would require God’s becoming a horror defeater. From the viewpoint of biblical religion, personhood is fundamental because God is personal, and horror defeat is in the hands of a personal God.

The God of biblical religion is poised to do the work of horror defeat. For starters, the God of biblical religion has the capital. God *is* incommensurate goodness. Intimate personal relationship with God, the Incommensurate Good, is incommensurately *good* for created persons. One way to defeat the ruinous disvalue of horror participation for created persons is to re-contextualize by imbedding it in the horror participant's on the whole and in the end beatific intimate personal relationship with God. The first step is Divine solidarity with us, ever present to us, recognized or unrecognized, through thick and thin. (Christian scenarios feature a more radical form of Divine solidarity: God's becoming human to take the "hard knocks" of individual horror participation by dying on a cross.) The second step is for God to heal our personal meaning-making capacities, to make us aware of Divine presence with us all the time, and to coach us in how to make positive sense of our experiences. The third step is for God to remodel our context, and that twice over. Because we are *material* persons, the final solution will involve a remodel of the material world, a domestication of the material into the household of the personal, a curtailing or altering of its causal interactions so that we are no longer radically vulnerable to horrors. Because we are *social*, because we define who we are and what we mean partly in terms of our social role, God must establish utopia, organize us into a society that does not spawn systemic evils.

So mainstream biblical religion puts a personal God at the heart of reality, material persons and Divine-human personal collaboration at the heart of Divine purposes for creation. If horrors are an inevitable by-product of material persons in a world such as this, the God of biblical religion plans from the beginning to be the horror defeater, who defeats the ruinous power of horrors by integrating them into something incommensurately good for the created person: namely, the created person's personal relationship with God. The God of biblical religion demands more of us than we can take, but the All-Wise God also knows that we can take only so much. The personal God of biblical religion eventually brings horrors to an end by remodeling material creation and by organizing utopia (cf. M.M. Adams 2006 for an expansion on these themes).

## God Because of Evils?

I set out to argue that realistic, purpose-driven optimism does not make sense in a world with horrors if there is no horror defeater. But we have seen that where realism and/or optimism are only Darwinian, the purpose-driven optimist has other options. The "less radical" involve qualified realism, dampened or dashed hopes, and/or curtailed meaning-making. Robust realism might drive a more "radical" conversion to a way of life that does not salvage but attempts to get beyond the personal.

For many if not most realistic purpose-driven optimists, giving up on personality will not be a live option. My *ad hominem* argument should have its maximum force with purpose-driven people who are both robustly realistic and robustly optimistic. Before they protest that conversion to theism is too radical, and put their trowels away in favor of a more superficial and disappointing solution, I want to remind them how much of their entrenched life posture biblical religion allows them to retain.

Biblical religion allows them to be at once robustly realistic about horrors and robustly optimistic about human prospects. Psychologically, the more confident we are of a horror defeater, the more we can afford to face up to just how bad things would be without one. Not only does biblical religion make persons metaphysically fundamental. Biblical religion

posits God, a realistic purpose-driven optimist at the heart of reality, a God who is robustly realistic and robustly optimistic, a God who creates us to be enterprising. Not only can robustly realistic optimists remain purpose-driven go-getters, the God of biblical religion offers them wider scope by inviting them into partnership with God!

My argument can be turned on its head to challenge believers. Biblical religion underwrites robust realism and robust optimism. Many theists would hold as an entrenched belief that God calls believers to what biblical religion underwrites. Such believers should find my argument a provocation to self-examination. Has their optimism been based on a blindered picture of reality? Has their purposiveness narrowed focus to local and surface meanings for the “lucky” and the fit? If my argument has force, it should pressure such believers into a life-posture shift out of timidity into boldness, into an embrace of a robust realism and robust optimism that labors purposefully within the expanded horizons toward which the God of biblical religion calls.

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Part II

# THEODICIES





# A Brief History of Theodicy

RENÉ VAN WOUDENBERG

A theodicy (the word is derived from the Greek words *theos*, God, and *dike*, justice) is one form of response to one problem of evil. Its main characteristic is that, while affirming both the existence of evil and the existence of God, that is, of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good creator and sustainer of the world, it is a systematic response to the question why God allows evil things to happen. So, responses to the problem of evil that involve a denial of the existence of evil do not qualify as theodicy. Nor do responses that involve a denial of God's omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and/or being the creator and sustainer of the world (process theology fits this description, as it denies God's omnipotence) (see Chapter 23). Accordingly, such responses are not the topic of this chapter. A theodicy as I have characterized it can be a response either to what has been called "the aporetic problem of evil," or to what have been called "arguments from evil" (McCord Adams and Adams 1990, 2), or to both (see Chapter 1). "Arguments from evil" are atheistic arguments – arguments that aim to disprove God's existence. The aporetic problem is the problem for theists how to square God's existence with the existence of evil.

Over the ages, many theodicies have been given. This chapter tells a brief history of theodicies. But what is it to tell a history of theodicies? Minimally, it is to place theodicies on a time line. Less minimally it is to locate and interpret them in their intellectual, religious, and cultural contexts. Still less minimally, it is to trace historical continuities and discontinuities between them, and to spell out the various criticisms they have elicited. Minimally even less, it is to explain what historical factors (such as historical events, intellectual developments, and scientific discoveries) have determined the content of the various theodicies. A maximal history of theodicy would also describe the numerous criticisms that have been leveled against the very undertaking of providing a theodicy (it would so to say narrate the history of "meta-theodicy"). This chapter does only part of the first three of these, and that even in a minimal way.

## Irenaeus (circa 130–202) and Soul-Making

Where does the history of theodicy start? One might think, at least in the Jewish-Christian tradition, in the texts that jointly compose the Bible. And it is true, we find many thoughts on God and evil (especially the evil of sin) in, for instance, Psalm 73, Job, Luke 13, and Romans 8. Important as they are, however, these texts do not provide anything like a theodicy, although they have often functioned as constraints on theodicies. For instance, one lesson that many have taken away from Job and Luke 13 is that not all evils are the results of sin, although some may be. And a lesson that many have taken away from Romans 8 is that God is capable of putting evil in service of the good.

Perhaps the first to provide something like a theodicy is the early church father Irenaeus in his *Against Heresies*, book IV. He held that human beings display the “image of God” in that they are intelligent creatures capable of fellowship with God. They are also capable of displaying the “likeness of God.” Simply by virtue of being created, humans display the image of God but not (yet) the likeness of God. Irenaeus compares the first human beings with untutored, uneducated children that have a long way to go before, through the working of the Holy Spirit, they begin to display the likeness of God. He depicts human life as a journey, a development that culminates in becoming like God. This world sets the stage for spiritual growth; it is the vale where our souls are being formed so as to eventually display God-likeness.

Irenaeus, in effect, suggests (in his *Proofs of the Apostolic Preaching*, chapter 12) that humans were created imperfect and immature and have to undergo moral development and spiritual growth in order to reach the perfection that God has intended for them. The fall of Adam, in his thought, is not a dramatic falling away from a state of perfection, but the lapse of a weak and immature child. The world with all its goods and evils is the stage God placed them on so as to grow toward perfection.

Irenaeus’ theodicy is that God allows natural evils (so earthquakes, tsunamis, volcano eruptions, and so on that threaten human lives) in order for humans to build their characters. And God allows moral evils (so war, murder, rape and other evils brought about by human actions) because of the great value of free will, the misuse of which is the cause of evil. God does not prevent evil to spring from bad actions, although he is capable of doing so. If God were to prevent bad actions from having bad consequences, God would constantly have to perform miracles, which would mean that the natural world would become massively irregular. But Irenaeus holds that there is great value in a natural world, as only such a world confronts us with the results of our actions and choices. In such a world, our actions will enable us to build our characters. Proper character building will ensure that humans eventually will display God’s likeness – and be worthy to dwell with God.

Irenaeus’ idea of soul-making has been taken up by many subsequent theodicians, sometimes in combination with other ideas, for instance by Joseph Butler, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and John Hick<sup>1</sup> (see Chapter 14).

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1 The Irenaean type of theodicy as well as Irenaeus’ own thoughts on evil are discussed at some length in Hick (1977).

## St. Augustine (354–430), *Privatio Boni*, and Free Will

St. Augustine developed his extraordinary influential ideas on theodicy in the wake of his farewell to Manichaeism and conversion to Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Mani adopted the gnostic dualist idea that there are two gods, an evil creator god and a good redeemer god. The creator god created the material world – and matter, Mani held, is evil. The redeemer god, by contrast, redeems the immaterial soul from its material shackles. These ideas form the backbone of Mani's response to the problem of evil – a response that obviously cannot qualify as a theodicy (as we defined it). After his conversion to Christianity, Augustine rejected this Gnostic dualism and adopted the belief that there is one God who is both the creator and the redeemer of the world. And thus the problem of evil took on a new shape for him, as he now had the difficult question on his hands how an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly loving creator of the world can allow evil. More perspicuously, the problem is that if God is the omnipotent and loving creator of the world and if there is evil in the world, it would seem to follow that God is also the creator of evil.

Augustine rejects this argument. How? He argues, first, that all created things are contingent, by which he means that they do not exist necessarily. But if they do not exist necessarily, they can change and be corrupted, that is, they can deviate from what they are supposed to be. Next, he introduces Plotinus' notion that evil is *privatio boni*, that is, a privation or lack of good (see Plotinus' *Enneads* I,8,3; I,8,7; Plotinus in turn borrowed the notion of privation from Aristotle). This is intended to mean that evil is not a separate positive substance or entity, but simply a lack or absence of good. Augustine illustrates this thought in the following way: sickness, he says, is not a separate "positive" entity. It is a *lack* of something – a lack of health. This becomes obvious once we realize that when someone recovers, the sickness does not retreat to some other place. It simply ceases to exist, which it would not, had it been a separate "positive" entity. This generalizes: evil is not a separate positive entity, but the absence of a positive reality. This idea has potential for a theodicy. It allows Augustine to say that when God created all things, he caused the existence only of positive realities, *not of privations*. And hence it allows him to say that God is not the cause of evil, even though he is the cause of everything.

A cautionary word is in order. To say that evil is a privation of good, is not to say that evil does not exist, nor that torture and rape are not evil, nor that evil is an illusion. The privation thesis is not a thesis about the *existence* of evil but a thesis about the *nature* of evil. It is the claim that evil is *not a positive substance*, that is, not an individual thing (unlike e.g., a cat which *is* an individual thing), but a lack of a certain property, *the absence of good*.<sup>3</sup> The idea that evil is a privation should be seen against the background of the claim, accepted throughout the middle ages and even much later, that whatever exists, is good (*ens et bonum convertuntur*, which can be explained by saying that "being" and "good" have different connotations, but the same denotation.)

So far, Augustine has explained what evil *is* and that God cannot be held responsible for it. But none of this explains *why* there is evil, or why God permits it. In dealing with these questions, Augustine develops in his book on free will, *De Libero Arbitrio*, another

2 Very readable accounts of Augustine on evil are Hick (1977, chapters III and IV) and Evans (1983).

3 For fuller discussion of the notion that evils are privations, see Cross (1989) and Calder (2007).

highly influential line of thought that has resurfaced throughout the history of theodicy. Evil, he says, is the result of bad and wrong choices made by free creatures – the result that is, of humans, and before them angels, misusing their free wills.

In his discussion of the origin of evil, then, Augustine stresses free will, which would seem to imply that at least humans have free will. But the picture is more complicated than that since Augustine held that ever since the fall of mankind into sin, humans no longer have wills that are free to do the good. There may be something of a free will in deciding between taking white or red wine, but doing good things is no longer something that a human being can choose for out of his own free will. Augustine had St. Paul in mind who wrote that “for not what I would, that do I practice; but what I hate to do,” (Romans 7). Augustine’s view is not that through the fall humans have lost their wills but rather that they have lost the power to chose to do the good; they still have wills, but they are not free – not free to decide to do what is good and not free to decide to not do bad and evil things. The will is enslaved.

This suggests that Augustine in effect offers what one might think of as an analysis of free will. Various analyses of free will can be and have been given, even though they have not been distinguished as clearly as one hopes for. According to one analysis, in current jargon this is the incompatibilist analysis, one has free will provided one has a real choice between available alternatives, for instance between lying and speaking the truth. According to the rival compatibilist analysis, one acts out of free will provided the act flows from the will of the agent, that is, when there is nothing external that prevents her from doing what she wills to do (such as a block on the road), nor anything external that forces her to do what she has no will to do (a gun to the head). So, when someone wills to lie, and there is nothing external that forces her to lie, or prevents her from lying, her lying is free – even if she had no choice about whether or not to lie, that is, even if it was determined that she would lie. This position is named compatibilism because it holds that free will is compatible with determinism (see Chapter 28).

It would seem that on Augustine’s view, after the fall humans have only free will in the compatibilist sense – at least with respect to what is good. Humans have the will to do certain things, but after the fall they will only bad things. When nothing external hinders them from doing those willed bad things, the will is free nonetheless. And when nothing external forces them to not do what they have the will to do, the will is likewise free. Augustine surely did not hold that after the fall humans have a will that is free to choose between good and bad things.

This is important to keep in mind, for when in later times reference is made to Augustine’s “free will defense” or “free will theodicy,” Augustine is mostly construed as an incompatibilist (see Chapter 14). Alvin Plantinga, for instance, pays tribute to Augustine in formulating his own free will defense, but adopts an incompatibilist view of free will, for his crucial claim is that if an actor has free will, by which he means the ability to chose freely between alternatives, then not even God can bring it about that the actor only does good deeds. It is indeed easier to see how an incompatibilist view of free will can function in a theodicy than a compatibilist view. Still, Augustine’s notion that the cause of evil is “the defection of the will of a being who is mutably good from the Good which is immutable,” (*Enchiridion* viii, 23; quoted after Hick 1977, 59) does go some way towards absolving God from blame for the existence of evil, although the question remains why God has not created agents such that they all and only willed good things – a question that does not arise for adherents of incompatibilist views of free will.

Many of Augustine's views on free will and evil have been adopted by Aquinas (1225–1274), as well as by John Calvin (1509–1564). Calvin maintains that Adam's choice between good and evil was free, but that after succumbing to sin, humans have lost the original freedom that Adam had, and are enslaved to sin ever since. At the same time Calvin says that "corrupted by the Fall, man sins willingly, not unwillingly or by compulsion; by the most eager inclination of his heart, not by forced compulsion from without" (Calvin 1961, II, iii.5). These ideas, it would seem, can only be squared with each other on the presupposition of compatibilism. For how can humans be enslaved to sin, and at the same time sin willingly and without compulsion? That can only be when "enslaved to sin" means "always willing to do sinful things." The question how these compatibilist ideas may be part of a theodicy, is *ad rem*. But we should keep in mind that an important theological motif behind theological compatibilist ideas is God's absolute sovereignty and in Calvin's case also the motif of divine predestination, both of which seem to leave little ground for incompatibilist (or libertarian) free will (see Chapter 17).

### Leibniz (1646–1716) and the Best of All Possible Worlds

The only book Leibniz published during his life time was *Essays of Theodicy, on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (1710) – and it seems to be the very first time the word "theodicy" is used. In this book, Leibniz responds to various unorthodox responses to the problem of evil (see Nadler 2008). On the one hand, to the Socinians who held that if God were omniscient, his existence would be incompatible with the existence of evil; but, as they maintained, since God is not all knowing, as he lacks knowledge of the future, the existence of evil does not pose a deep problem for belief in the existence of God. On the other hand, he responds to Pierre Bayle, who held that the Manicheist heresy (i.e., the view that there are two gods, a creator god who is evil, and a redeemer god who is good) cannot be refuted by reason alone (faith and revelation are needed for that) and hence that a rational theodicy is impossible. Against the Socinians, Leibniz maintains God's omniscience and against Bayle the possibility of a rational theodicy.

The beating heart of Leibniz's theodicy is the claim that God has created the best of all possible worlds (see Chapter 16). His argument for this is that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good, and that such a God, when he creates a world, will create the best one possible. It is impossible that there be a world that is better than the actual world, *this* world.

This argument obviously assumes that there is a best of possible worlds. This assumption has been contested. Aquinas, for instance, held that there is an infinity of possible worlds that are increasingly good, and hence that for each good world, there is a better one. Accordingly, there is no best of all possible worlds. And hence God cannot be faulted for not creating the best world. Creating the best world is as impossible as mentioning the highest number. If Leibniz's argument is to go through, he needs to meet this objection. And so he does. The lynch pin is the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which states that everything must have a sufficient reason, that is, a reason that explains why *it* and not something else obtains. Applied to the current topic, this means there must be a reason why this world obtains, and not another. Leibniz's argument is that if there is an infinity of increasingly good worlds, there is no sufficient reason for this world's obtaining. Not even *God's decree that this world be actual* can be such a reason. For the Principle of Sufficient Reason

applies to God's decrees as it does to everything else. But if there is an infinity of increasingly good worlds, then there is no sufficient reason for God's decree that this world be the actual world. And that is absurd. For surely, for everything that God does, there must be a sufficient reason.

So Leibniz argues that this world is the best of all possible worlds. Now one might object to this by pointing out that there are instances of evil, for example, the rape of an innocent child, a freak accident, willful murder, and so on that the world could easily be without, and hence that this world is not the best of worlds. Leibniz replies that we do not really know that the world can be without these evils. And we do not really know this, because we do not know how all these evils hang together with other events in the world, and hence do not really know whether the excision of these evils would result in a world with greater net goodness (see Chapter 29). Hence, we cannot conclude that this objection succeeds.

### Joseph Butler (1692–1752) and the Imperfect Comprehension of God's Government

Joseph Butler, in his masterpiece *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736), makes a very different sort of response to the problem of evil than does Leibniz, although ignorance plays a crucial role in both, but one that, I submit, still qualifies as a theodicy as I have defined it. Butler makes his response in discussion with deists, who held that after having created the world, God has left the world to itself. Accordingly, deists have no need for a theodicy, as they deny that God sustains and governs the world. Butler, by contrast, affirms God's sustenance of and providence over the world and works out a far reaching analogy between God's governance over the natural world and God's governance over the moral world.

As to the natural world, Butler makes the point that God's governance over it does not take the form of a series of unrelated *ad hoc* acts, but that it is regular and lawlike. Furthermore, the natural world is a *whole*, its parts are interrelated in multifarious ways, nothing is unrelated to anything else. Moreover, many natural events have future consequences that we do not and cannot know. "Things seemingly the most insignificant imaginable, are perpetually observed to be necessary conditions to other things of the greatest importance." The natural world, and God's governance of it, then, "is so incomprehensible, that a man must, really in the literal sense, know nothing at all who is not sensible of his ignorance in it" (Butler [1736] 1850, part I, section VII).

God's governance of the moral world, that is, the world of free human agents, is likewise not *ad hoc* but regular and lawlike. More specifically, God governs the moral world by a system of rewards and punishments. Also, human actions have effects in the world – no action is without some effect somewhere. Finally, human actions, allowed by God, have future consequences that we do not and cannot know (see Chapter 29).

Together with one rather plausible moral principle, and one supposed metaphysical fact, these ideas make for a theodicy. The principle is that "means very undesirable often conduce to bring about ends in such a measure desirable, as greatly to overbalance the disagreeableness of the means," (Butler [1736] 1850, part I, section VII), for undesirable things (evils) can be outweighed by the greater goods they bring about. The supposed metaphysical fact that Butler argues for is that death is not the destruction of the human person, but that there is a future life even after the dissolution of their bodies. This makes

for the following theodicy: by experience we know that some evils are redeemed by the greater goods for which they are the necessary means. Since we are ignorant of the manifold intricate relations that exist between events and states of affairs, we are never in a position to say that a particular evil is not redeemed by some greater good; this is all the more so if we acknowledge that the connections between events and states of affairs reach well beyond the grave.

Is this a theodicy? Well yes, for while affirming both the existence of evil and the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good creator and sustainer of the world, it is a response to the question why God allows evil things to happen. But there is, of course, a striking difference between Butler's and Leibniz's theodicy. Whereas the latter stresses that what we can and do know about God and various metaphysical and moral principles, the former stresses our ignorance. But, it must be added, Butler does not think we are *completely* ignorant in the relevant respects here. Certain things must be known, or at least rationally believed, if his theodicy is to work, especially (i) that there are evils that are redeemed by the greater goods they bring about, and (ii) that death is not the destruction of the human person.

Butlerian types of theodicy have currently regained currency under the name "skeptical theism,"<sup>4</sup> one core idea of which is that even though, as the skeptical theist assumes, God will have good reasons for allowing particular evils, we are mostly ignorant of those reasons; the flip side of this is that, from an epistemic point of view, we are never in the position to claim that there are evils for which God has no good reasons to allow them (see Chapter 29).

## George W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) and the Cunning of Reason

With considerable trepidation, I move on to a great critic of Leibniz, who also aimed to provide what he called a theodicy, although it remains to be seen whether he really gave one – according to my definition, that is. Possibly more than any philosopher before him, Hegel is sensitive to history, which he colorfully depicts as a slaughterhouse. Now Hegel considers himself as the philosophical heir of Christianity, which he held is the highest developed form of religion. What Christianity preaches in theological terms, Hegel aims to elevate or "lift up" to the level of philosophical concepts. For instance, he substitutes "God" for "Reason" ("Vernunft"), and this denotes, in different contexts, the same as "Geist" ["Spirit"] and "Idee" ["Idea"], and reinterprets the claim that God created the world as the thesis that Reason exteriorizes itself in Nature.

In order to understand Hegel's theodicy, it is crucial to see that, according to Hegel, after Reason has exteriorized itself in Nature, Nature moves back to Reason in the historical unfolding of Nature. It is a moving back, because Nature brings forth conscious (human) thought, and social life, and states – all of which are manifestations in Nature of Spirit or Reason. Hegel depicts the history of the world, then, as the process of Reason coming to itself via a process of exteriorization. He claims that the goal of the entire historical process is that Reason gets to know itself better, so as to eventually become fully reflectively aware of itself.

4 See the essays by Steve Wykstra and William Alston in Howard-Snyder (1996).



In a famous passage in the Introduction of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1837)), Hegel says that “the only thought that philosophy brings with it [in considering history], is the simple thought of Reason, that Reason rules the world, and hence that the history of the world is a reasonable process.”<sup>5</sup> This thought cannot be read off of the surface of history as it is narrated in chronicles and history books. It is a philosophical thought that Hegel brings with him as he considers the history of the world. But once one brings that thought with one, world history itself looks reasonable. Hegel epitomized this in the famous saying “Wer die Welt vernünftig ansieht, den sieht Sie vernünftig an” or “whoever looks at the world with reason, will find that the world itself looks reasonable.”

This leads up to the following theodicy: when one looks at the world with reason, that is, views world history as the process in which Reason is coming to itself, then all the evils that we see must be moments in this usurping process of Reason’s self-enlightenment. To be sure, not very many world historical figures have believed that history is the process of Reason coming to itself – they have pursued their own limited goals, some good, some bad, in a variety of ways, some good, some bad. But Reason is not hindered or hemmed by the limited goals that finite subjects have pursued. For it is capable to use the attainment of these limited goals for the attainment of its own good, that is, self-knowledge. In his explanation of that process, Hegel gives pride of place to the notion of the “cunning of Reason,” which must be viewed as a philosophical analogue of the doctrine of divine Providence.

As I said, I include Hegel in this chapter with trepidation. This is because Hegel’s fundamental thought that the goal of world history is that Reason gets to know itself better, is without parallel in Jewish-Christian theism. The great German historian Leopold von Ranke once remarked that on Hegel’s view “history is basically the history of a becoming God.” Distancing himself from this, von Ranke continues by saying “I for myself, gentlemen, believe in him that was, is, and will be.”<sup>6</sup> So, Hegel is not working with the concept of God that is required for a theodicy (in my sense). Still, I include him because when, as Hegel alleges, at the end of history Reason has *become* omniscient, we are supposed to see that Reason’s existence is compatible with the evils of the world – they are even required for Reason’s gaining omniscience.

## C.S. Lewis (1898–1963), Free Will, and God’s Megaphone

Between the two world wars, when neopositivism reigned supremely, many philosophers (and theologians as well) were swayed by the idea, articulated powerfully by the so-called linguistic philosophers from Oxford and Cambridge, that religious statements are cognitively meaningless, which was supposed to entail, among other things, that religious statements lack truth-value. (An influential statement of this idea is Ayer 1936.) In such a

5 The work I am quoting from has not been translated in its entirety into English. Parts have been translated and published as Hegel (1953). The quote in the body of the text is my translation – for which I have used the 1970 Suhrkamp edition of Hegel’s work, p. 20.

6 The German words are: Die Geschichte auf diesem Standpunkt ist eigentlich eine Geschichte des werdenden Gottes; ich meinerseits, meine Herren, glaube an den, der da war und da ist und seyn wird. Quoted after Kessel (1954, 306).

climate, any theodicy is wont to appear ill-conceived, if not ridiculous. It is therefore highly interesting that from the inside of the Oxford/Cambridge citadel, two persons, one, a nonphilosopher who was to gain enormous public acclaim, and the other, a top-notch but insufficiently appreciated philosopher, found the courage to address the problem of evil.

The nonphilosopher is C.S. Lewis, who published in 1940 *The Problem of Pain*, in which, without using the word, he aimed to provide a theodicy – one that was obviously inspired by Augustine, but also by Irenaeus, and at the same time contains original new ideas. The world, says Lewis, exists primarily in order for God to love human beings: “We were made, not primarily that we may love God . . . but that God may love us, that we become objects in which the Divine love may rest ‘well pleased’” (Lewis 1940, 39–40). Due to the misuse we have made of our free wills, however, we are no such objects. We must *become* them. Now it is part of our sinful human condition to be forgetful of our very condition, to be content with ourselves, to turn our backs on the Divine love, and to live the illusion that we are self-sufficient. In this situation, says Lewis, the following is true: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world” (Lewis 1940, 91). Pain and suffering are God’s wake-up call, they are the means that God uses to alert us to our sad condition, and to make us feel our deep but suppressed desire for the one thing that we really need, a deep loving relationship with God (see Chapters 15 and 18). It is not that God is a masochist, for he wants us to be truly happy and satisfied. But in order for us to become truly happy and satisfied, we need to be changed, and surrender ourselves to God.

Lewis sometimes seems to endorse the view that God himself is the cause of evil. For instance, when discussing misfortune falling on decent, inoffensive, worthy people, he says:

Let me implore the reader to try to believe . . . that God, who made these deserving people, may really be right when He thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed. . . . Therefore He troubles them, warning them of an insufficiency that one day they will have to discover. (Lewis 1940, 95)

At the same time, he endorses the view that human suffering is caused, for the most, by humans that misuse their freedom. These two lines of thought are not necessarily at odds with each other, as God, who does no evil, might not only allow the evils that humans cause for each other, but to use them for their good – a thought that Romans 8 seems to air.

But then what about the suffering of animals? For them suffering cannot be a divine megaphone. Here Lewis speculates (i) that animals lack a “coordinating I or soul,” and hence do not suffer pain in the ways humans do, and (ii) that a created power misused its freedom thus wreaking havoc in the animal world long before humans came around (see Chapter 8).

## A.C. Ewing (1899–1973) and the Principle of Organic Unities

The top-notch philosopher I meant is A.C. Ewing, who worked mainly in meta-ethics. In his posthumously published *Value and Reality*, he proffers, as the subtitle indicates, his “philosophical case for theism.” As part of his case, he aims solve the problem of evil. Since he held that evil exists, and that God, who is omnipotent and perfectly good, exists as well, what he aims at is a theodicy. He makes essentially four points, the first two of which he

claims are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a solution of the problem of evil; the other two points have additional theodical relevance. His first and most important point is that “it does appear quite clear that some goods, and these by no means the lowest but among the highest, are such that they necessarily involve some evil as the condition of their attainment” (Ewing 1973, 215). His examples are courage, unselfishness, and the highest forms of love, all of which are of great intrinsic value but unattainable without suffering (see Chapter 13). To underpin his claim, he invokes G.E. Moore’s famous principle of organic unities, which says that the value of a whole is not necessarily equal to the sum of the values of the parts taken separately. The total value of a whole is affected not only by its parts taken separately, but also by the way the parts are related. This principle has a corollary that is directly relevant to the problem of evil. It entails that the addition to a whole of a part which is bad in itself, can actually increase the value of the whole to which it is added. And this means that the production of an evil part can be justified, namely if it adds to the whole a value which outweighs the disvalue of the part. There is a variety of cases that Ewing discusses in order to show that the principle is sound, such as the pain that is present in the loving sympathy for the suffering of others, and the aesthetic experience provided by a tragedy or sorrowful tale, the acquisition of a moral virtue by overcoming real temptations. In cases of this kind, the relation between the evil part and the good whole is not a causal one; it is a part-whole relation. In other kinds of cases, something good is for its value dependent on something that is itself bad, but that is not contained in it. For example, sympathy and benevolence would not exist if there would be no evils that make these attitudes appropriate. So, there exist goods that could not exist without corresponding evils – Ewing calls these “mixed goods.” To be sure, not all goods are mixed; the good of experiencing a beautiful landscape, for example, does not need the presence of any evil. But some goods are mixed. And a world containing unmixed as well as mixed goods, Ewing avers, is better than a world containing only unmixed ones. Hence, God is not unjust in allowing such a world to exist.

The second point Ewing makes is that indeterminism is true and that it is a necessary condition for any plausible theodicy. Indeterminism is the thesis that some events are such that there are no sufficient physical conditions for their taking place. Jane’s free decision to help Jack is such an event (as are certain quantum events). But if indeterminism is true, then “it is logically impossible to guarantee completely that an undetermined being will always do what is best.” Hence “much of the evil there is may be regarded as independent of God’s will” (Ewing 1973, 222) (see Chapter 14).

Third, Ewing advances the following principle: if something *A* is related by relation *r* to something else *B*, then *B* stands in the converse of *r* to *A* (and this may be either *r*, or a different relation). But now the following may be true: even though it is best that *A* is related to *B* by *r*, it is bad that *B* is related to *A* by the converse of *r*. For instance, it might be best for *A* to be monogamously married to *B*, but much better for *B* to be monogamously married to *C* (and so bad for *B* to be monogamously married to *A*). In that case, *A* and *B* cannot both be satisfied, as at least one of them will have to bear the evil of unrequited love. So what is best for one, may clash with what is best for another – and it may hence be impossible, even in the best possible world, that everyone is satisfied.

A fourth and final point concerns causal laws, that Ewing thinks of along the lines of the “entailment theory,” according to which, and contrary to the rival Humean regularity theory, there is something in the nature of the cause that necessitates the effect. On this theory causal laws have a status not dissimilar from logical laws: they are independent of

God's will. Now suppose the following is a causal law: failure to gain what we desire tends to make us unhappy. Then, "since desire is necessary for action, or for any life of the type we live, and men being finite could not possibly always get what they desire, and moral progress depends on a disciplining of desires, we have an entailment which renders some evil in the pursuit of good inevitable" (Ewing 1973, 224). Now we do not know which causal laws must be thought of along the lines of the entailment theory – hence it remains an open possibility, concludes Ewing, "that the causal entailments independent of God's will are sufficient to explain much of the evil in the world" (Ewing 1973, 224).

This fourth point may give us pause as to whether Ewing offers a theodicy (on the definition used). For if causal entailments are independent of God's will, we may take this to mean that God is not omnipotent – unless there is an argument to the effect that just as the laws of logic do not infringe on God's omnipotence, the causal entailments do not either.

### Alvin Plantinga (b.1937), Free Will Defense, and "O Felix Culpa" Theodicy

More than any other twentieth- (and twenty-first-) century philosopher, Alvin Plantinga has brought rigor as well as finesse to the discussion of the problem of evil – which he accomplished by applying possible world metaphysics to the topic. In *The Nature of Necessity*, he made a distinction between a theodicy and a defense (Plantinga 1974, 192). A defense is an argument that purports to show that the argument from evil (as meant in the first paragraph of this chapter) according to which the propositions (a) "God is omnipotent and wholly good" and (b) "Evil exists" are in contradiction with each other, is unsuccessful (see Chapter 2). Plantinga not only defines what a defense is, he also offers one, the celebrated Augustine-inspired Free Will Defense (Plantinga 1974, chapter IX). It consists in showing that there is a proposition (c) that has the following characteristics: (i) it is possibly true, (ii) it is consistent with (a), and (iii) together with (a) it entails (b). That proposition (c), Plantinga argues, is that "God could not have created a universe containing moral good, without creating one containing moral evil." And of course, if it can be shown that (c) is possible, then it has been shown that (a) and (b) are compatible with each other (i.e., then it has been shown that both can be true). This defense is weak in that it argues only that (c) is *possible* – not that it is in fact *true*. If it could be shown that (c) is in fact true, we would have a free will *theodicy* – but Plantinga does not aim to prove (c), as his aim is ("only" – but it is already quite an accomplishment!) to unsettle one argument from evil – and this does not require anything stronger than showing that (c) is possibly true. Plantinga's defense is generally considered to be as successful as a philosophical argument can be.

In 2004, Plantinga moved on from defense to theodicy (Plantinga 2004), taking his cue from the words of the Roman Catholic Easter Vigil liturgy *O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem*, "O happy guilt, that brought us such a wonderful Saviour." Two ideas are leading in this theodicy. First, God exists necessarily, that is, he exists in every possible world. Furthermore, God has such properties as unlimited goodness, love, knowledge, and power essentially: he has them in every world in which he exists (which means in all possible worlds). But then, worlds that are not very good are impossible: God would not (and even could not) create a world that contains just him and creatures always experiencing excruciating pain. All possible worlds are simply very good, because they contain God who is perfectly good. No matter how much sin, and suffering, and evil a

world W contains, the sin and so on in it is vastly outweighed by the incommensurable goodness of God's existence, hence that world is a very good world. Now this does not mean that all possible worlds are of equal value. Some are much better than others. Here the second leading idea comes in. Says Plantinga:

There is a second and enormously impressive good-making feature of our world, a feature to be found only in some and not in all possible worlds. This is the towering and magnificent good of divine incarnation and atonement. (Plantinga 2004, 9)

There are possible worlds in which there are free creatures who go wrong, but in which there is no atonement; in such a world, creatures suffer the consequences of their sins and are ultimately cut off from God. A world like that, even though it contains the magnificent good of God's existence, is not as good as a world in which creatures are offered redemption and salvation from their sins. Now Plantinga suggests that all worlds in which incarnation and atonement are present are worlds of very great goodness, and in fact achieving a level of goodness that no world without incarnation and atonement can achieve. Accordingly, if God wanted to actualize a really good world, he will create a world with incarnation and atonement. But of course, all such worlds will have to contain that which requires atonement: sin and its evil consequences. So Plantinga's theodicy, in bold strokes, is that since God wanted to actualize one of the best possible worlds, and since the best possible worlds contain incarnation and atonement, and atonement requires sin and evil, all the best of possible worlds contain sin and evil. Since our world contains God as well as incarnation and atonement, our world is one of the very best possible worlds, but in order for it to be such, sin and evil are necessary.

Plantinga's theodicy obviously goes beyond bare theism, as it makes essential reference to the specifically Christian teachings of sin, incarnation, and atonement. It furthermore assumes the notion that human beings have free will in the sense that they can decide to go against God's will and wish.

### **Richard Swinburne (b. 1934) and the Goods that Outweigh Evil**

The most fully developed theodicy in current thought is Richard Swinburne's impressive 1998 *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (see Chapter 14). Contrary to many theologians who hold that Christian thought involves no claims to sober truth, and who are, in effect, theological antirealists, Swinburne takes up the grand tradition of philosophical theology to which the names of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Leibniz are affixed. Swinburne freely uses many thoughts from the history of theodicy, for example, those about free will and the Fall. His unique contribution to this history (and so to the topic), it seems to me, is twofold. First, in his elaboration of the point, made by, among others, Ewing, that many goods cannot exist without suffering and evil. For instance, it is good for agents to have very serious libertarian free will, so to have the capacity to make morally weighty decisions. But God cannot give agents free will, and at the same time guarantee that they will only decide to do good things. So, the possibility of making wrong choices is necessary for the good of free will. This is familiar by now. What Swinburne adds is that agents need to have desires if they are to make decisions that lead up to actions and that if the choice between

two actions of differential value is to be free and weighty, agents need to have a desire for the better action *as well as* for the lesser and possibly very wrong action. After all, without a desire for the lesser action, there would be no serious choice to be made. But of course, the desire for a lesser, possibly even bad, action, is a bad thing in itself. Swinburne goes even further and argues that if a choice is to be really serious, the desire for the lesser (even bad) action needs to be stronger than the desire for the better action. So, the good of free choice requires the evil of bad and wrong desires. Likewise, there is great value in finding things out, in cooperative investigation, and in helping others in finding the truth. But in order for these goods to become real, ignorance and false belief are required. Again, pain and suffering make possible a wide variety of goods that could not exist without them, such as compassion, care, and the desire to be of help to the sufferer; suffering, furthermore, provides an opportunity to mutual involvement, which is good for the sufferer but also for the comforter; suffering provides opportunities to shape our character (thought of as our moral convictions, desires, and tendencies to respond to a wide variety of circumstances), for we shape our characters through the choices we make in responding to pain and suffering. Now one might flag the point that all these goods could be realized even if there was no real pain and suffering, and hence that God could have set up the world in such a way that although no one really ever suffered, others think they do and accordingly respond with compassion and care. But this, Swinburne argues, would fly in the face of a plausible principle that he dubs the Principle of Honesty, according to which “God has an obligation not to make a world in which agents are systematically deceived on important matters without their having the possibility of discovering their deception” (Swinburne 1998, 139). And Swinburne points to a whole further array of goods that require for their realization evils of various kinds.

A second element of Swinburne’s salutary contribution to the history of theodicy is his sustained reflection on the question under what conditions God has the right (is it morally permissible for him) to bring about bad states for the sake of good states that they make possible. Swinburne starts out by noticing that human parents sometimes have a moral right to allow certain evils to befall on their dependent children, for example, when their child has a terrible toothache and a painful operation is required. Of course, for other evils, parents may not have a right to allow them. The relation between parents and children is peculiar in that children are, in many respects, dependent on their parents. This dependence gives the parents the moral duty to care for their children. And if they fulfill their duties, parents have certain rights with respect to the child, for example, the right to determine where the child will live and be educated, and the right to be obeyed. They also have a right, within limits, to inflict pain on their children, as in the case of surgery, if that is, overall, best for them. Now humans are much more dependent upon God, who sustains them every day of their lives, than children are dependent upon the parents. And the greater the duty to care, the greater (if the duty is fulfilled) the consequent rights. So God has a right to allow evils to befall humans. But that right is not unlimited. God must not allow (or cause) harm to humans that is uncompensated by benefits to them – benefits that may be reaped only in the future life. Swinburne conclusion is that “God does have the right [to allow humans (and animals) to suffer] so long as the package of life is overall a good one for each of us. Bad aspects have to be compensated by good aspects” (Swinburne 1998, 235). The crucial point is that God must not over time take back as much as he has given. He must remain on balance a benefactor.



## Looking Back

Looking back on this ever so brief narration of the history of theodicy, we may note that certain fundamental ideas about the relation between God and evil recur time and again. The most fundamental idea, presumably, is what we might call the “greater good idea,” the idea, that is, that evils, or their possibility, are needed for certain goods – goods through which the evils are redeemed. This idea comes through in the recurrent theme of free will, as free will makes possible certain goods, while at the same time making possible certain evils. It also comes through in the recurrent theme of soul-making: spiritual growth is a great good, that requires for its occurrence adversities such as pain, suffering, and evil. It also comes through in the application of the principle of organic unities to the problem of evil. It also comes through in the O felix culpa theme. Another recurrent theme is that evil is a form of divine punishment. And as such is may be part of God’s governance, perhaps functioning as a divine megaphone. A further theme, one that particularly speaks to the problem of natural evil, is the idea that a regular natural world, even though it may be a cause of pain and suffering, is a good thing, as it makes possible such good things as the making and executing of plans, taking care of each other, and many things more. A final theme is the epistemological point that humans are very limited in seeing the connections between events (we may very often not see to what good a particular evil contributes, nor whether the evil is redeemed by the good for which it may be held necessary) and hence also very limited in knowing the divine reasons for allowing evil.

## Acknowledgments

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of my friend Alien Aukema, who was murdered in Amsterdam on Good Friday 1980 by an Egyptian refugee she had been helping but who believed she was trying to poison him.

For comments on earlier versions of this chapter, I am indebted to Sander Griffioen, Gerben Groenewoud, Rik Peels, Jeroen de Ridder, Emanuel Rutten, and an anonymous reviewer for this volume. Part of this work was made possible by a grant from the Templeton World Charity Foundation.

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# Counterpart and Appreciation Theodicies

JUSTIN P. McBRAYER

A man is on trial for murder. The prosecution shows the jury that the defendant's fingerprints were found at the crime site. Furthermore, the victim's blood was found on the defendant's clothing. This looks like pretty good evidence that the defendant is guilty – after all, it would be *surprising* if his fingerprints were at the scene and the victim's blood was on his clothes if he were innocent. However, despite appearances, the defense attorney has a case. She can explain the facts about the prints and the blood while maintaining that her client is innocent by proving that the defendant was actually the medical first responder to the crime scene. Given this explanation, it is now *unsurprising* that the defendant's fingerprints were at the scene and that the victim's blood was on his clothes. Hence, the prints and blood no longer serve as good evidence for the defendant's guilt.

Compare this situation to the problem of evil. Some philosophers show the jury a world filled with a wide variety of evils. This looks like pretty good evidence that there is not a perfectly powerful, perfectly good being like God in control of the world. After all, it would be *surprising* to find a wide variety of evil in a world governed by a being like God (see Chapter 4). However, despite appearances, other philosophers have a response. Parallel to the case earlier, these philosophers attempt to explain the facts about evil while maintaining that God is “innocent.” Given a successful explanation, it would be *unsurprising* that the world is filled with evil even if there were a God. Hence, the evil in the world would not serve as good evidence for the nonexistence of God.

Philosophers who offer such explanations for evil are in the business of offering a *theodicy* (see Chapter 12). A theodicy for some given fact about evil is an explanation for why God would have an all-things-considered sufficient reason to allow that evil. If a theodicy is successful, then it shows why the fact about evil in question is not evidence against the existence of God. And when it comes to the argument from evil, there are a wide variety of facts about evil that have been cited as evidence against the existence of God. For example, some people object to the *amount* of evil in the world (e.g., why would God allow

so much evil in the world?). Others object to the existence of specific *types* of evil in the world (e.g., why would God allow cancer?). Others object to the *distribution* of evil in the world (e.g., why would God allow children to suffer?). Finally, others object to particular *tokens* of evil in the world (e.g., why did God allow the Holocaust?). For ease of discussion, the term ‘evil’ will stand for any of these facts about evil in our world.

Philosophers have offered a great many theodicies, and it is contentious whether any is a success. In particular, there are two theodicies that are extremely common among those who first encounter the problem of evil. Consider the following excerpt from an actual student paper on the problem of evil:

After much thought on the issue, two conclusions have seemed rational to me and justifiable by a Christian God. The first one is simple that God allows moral evil to occur so that we as a human race have the opportunity to know what “good” is. Without the presence of evil, good would not be good, it would just be neutral.<sup>1</sup>

There are actually two distinct theodicies at play here, and despite their popularity, both are almost completely overlooked in the professional literature. Worse, where they are mentioned, they are either confused for a single theodicy or hastily dismissed.<sup>2</sup> But they are quite distinct and quite interesting.

The first of these theodicies says that good cannot exist without evil, and so God must allow evil in order to allow good. Call this the *counterpart theodicy*. The counterpart theodicy relies on a *metaphysical* claim about existence – good cannot exist without evil. The second theodicy says that we would be unable to know/recognize/appreciate the good without evil, and so God is forced to allow evil in order to allow for such appreciation. Call this the *appreciation theodicy*. The appreciation theodicy relies on an *epistemological* claim about recognition or appreciation – we are unable to know/recognize/appreciate good without evil (even if it is possible for good to *exist* without evil). Determining whether either of these theodicies is a success requires a careful discussion of whether either meets the conditions on a successful theodicy.

## Necessary Conditions for a Successful Theodicy

To get a handle on what would make a theodicy successful, consider another legal analogy. The accused is charged with speeding and reckless driving. He drove over 60 mph in a school zone where he was pulled over by local police. The prosecuting attorney asks the judge for a stiff fine. However, the defense attorney has a case. She grants that her client was speeding in a school zone, but she insists that his behavior is *justified*. To make her case, the defense attorney provides evidence that her client was driving an injured child to the hospital and that time was of the essence. Furthermore, it was the middle of the night, so school was not in session nor were there any other cars on the road. No one was endangered by her client’s behavior. Thus, while it is true that he broke the law, he was justified in doing so.

1 Quote from a paper by Isaac Bickel, a student in Introduction to Philosophy at Fort Lewis College, Fall semester 2011.

2 For an example of the former, see Mackie (1982, 151–152); for an example of the latter, see Van Inwagen (2006, 68–69).

The defense attorney's case will work as long as three conditions are met. First, her story about her client must be *true*. If it were false that he had an injured child in the backseat, then this story would not excuse his behavior. Second, her story must do an *adequate* job of explaining why her client broke the law in question. For example, this story would not explain why the driver had an expired license plate. Third, her story must explain why it was *better*, all things considered, to break the law in this case. If time was not of the essence (e.g., if the child only had a toothache) or if speeding would endanger the lives of more people than it would save, her client's behavior would not be justified.

We can think of the defense attorney's case as a theodicy for her client's behavior. It is an attempt to show that her client is justified despite breaking the law. And just as the defense attorney's case must meet three conditions to be a success, so, too, a theodicy about evil must meet three conditions to be a success. First, the theodicy must be true. This is how a theodicy differs from a defense (see Chapter 27). A theodicy explains evil by appeal to something we know to be true whereas a defense explains evil by appeal to something that might be true for all we know (i.e., by appeal to something that is consistent with what we know). A theodicy is thus obviously stronger than a defense.<sup>3</sup> In the case earlier, the defense attorney who can show that her client *did* have an injured child in the backseat has done a better job defending her client than a defense attorney who can merely show that her client *might have had* an injured child in the backseat for all we know.

Second, a successful theodicy is one that provides a sufficiently good explanation for the evil in question. In most cases, this amounts to showing that God could not guarantee that some good obtain or that some worse evil be averted without allowing either the possibility or the actuality of the evil in question. Call this the *adequacy condition*. Such a theodicy need not explain every single feature of the evils in question no more than a successful theory of heart disease is tasked with explaining every single instance of a heart attack. But to be useful in explaining evil, and hence showing how evil is not evidence against the existence of God, a theodicy has to do a sufficiently good job of explaining the entire range of facts about evil that stand in need of explanation.<sup>4</sup>

Third, and finally, a successful theodicy must explain why God would have an all-things-considered sufficient reason for allowing the evil in question. In most cases, this amounts to showing that the good result is enough to *compensate* for the evil itself or the possibility of the evil. Call this the *compensating condition*. Note, too, that the good result need not ultimately obtain for the compensating condition to be met: the driver would be excused for speeding even if the child ultimately dies in the hospital. But not every "trade-off" between goods and evils will meet the compensating condition. For example, a good parent will not feed his children poisoned sweets. In this case, the good of the experience does not compensate

3 It is a substantive question whether the counterpart and appreciation theodicies should be offered as theodicies or defenses. In my experience, they are almost always offered as theodicies – their defenders mean to be making true claims about the nature of goodness, and so on. However, I think that the objections that I raise to using these strategies as theodicies will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to defenses, so I do not think much hangs on how we interpret them at this point.

4 No doubt this condition is vague. How much evil must a theodicy explain to be sufficient? There is probably no answer to this question. But in defense of the condition, note that the same problem arises in the scientific domain, and this does not prevent us from making judgments of adequacy in that domain. Intuitively, some scientific theories provide sufficiently good explanations for physical data whereas others do not. The same holds here.

for the evil of being poisoned. So, too, for God to have an all-things-considered sufficient reason to allow evil, there must be a sufficient amount of good (or at least the possibility for a sufficient amount of good) secured by the evil (or the risk of evil).

Putting these three conditions together, we can say that a successful theodicy for any fact about evil will be a true claim (or set of claims) that meets both the adequacy and the compensating conditions. Each of these three conditions is necessary.<sup>5</sup> Our next task is to clearly state both the counterpart and appreciation theodicies and see whether either meets all three of the conditions for a successful theodicy.

## The Counterpart Theodicy

In a nutshell, the counterpart theodicy says that there cannot be good without evil. This is a metaphysical claim about how the world is constituted. The idea is that good and evil are like metaphysical twins or like two sides of the same coin: anytime you have the one, you have the other. When two things are bound together in this way, philosophers call them counterparts. Counterparts are things that are logically or metaphysically impossible to “separate” – the existence of one is modally required for the other. The counterpart theodicy claims that there is a metaphysical link between goodness and evil such that anytime you have the former, you have the latter as well.<sup>6</sup>

There are many counterparts in the world. Take, for instance, mountains and valleys. Given what it is to be a mountain, there has to be some mass of land to contrast it against, such as a valley or a plain. Without the contrast, there could not be a mountain. Similarly, there could not be mothers without children. Given what it is to be a mother, there could not be a world in which there were mothers but no offspring. And lots of properties seem to have counterpart properties: nothing can be red without also being colored, nothing can be a circle without being a plane figure, and so on.

In order to see how a counterpart theodicy could show that God has an all-things-considered sufficient reason for allowing evil, it is important to clearly state the content of the theodicy since there are a variety of permutations. Let us start here:

- C1: Necessarily, if there is an instantiation of good, there is at least one instantiation of evil.

C1 allows for a many-to-one correspondence of good to evil. Goodness merely requires that there exist some token of evil or other in the universe. Now the obvious problem with C1 is that it is too weak to explain all of the evil in our world. If God only required that there be a single token of evil in the world in order to secure all of the goods that he is

5 It is an interesting question whether meeting these three conditions is *sufficient* for a successful theodicy. At least some philosophers disagree and note a further condition: God must have the right to subject people to suffering, and so on, and that without this right it would not matter whether He could use evil to bring about good. I leave this question open since settling it is not crucial for determining whether the counterpart or appreciation theodicy succeeds.

6 For the counterpart theodicy to be a success, it is only necessary for the modal dependency to go in one direction: anytime there is good, there must be evil as well. Whether or not one could have evil without having good is another question.

interested in promoting, then surely he would do so. But our world contains many evils. Hence, C1 fails the adequacy condition – it does not do an adequate job of explaining the evils in our world (at best, it only explains one token of evil!). But, of course, it was a strange principle anyway. In the commonsense examples of counterparts listed earlier, the counterpart relation applies to *every* instantiation of the properties. So we might try a stronger principle:

C2: Necessarily, for *every* instantiation of good, there is a *unique* instantiation of evil.

If C2 were true, then every good thing in the world must be paired with a counterpart evil. The two are in one-to-one correspondence. Given C2, God is limited in his choice of worlds to create: he could create a world without evil, but that requires that he create a world without good. Or he could create a world filled with goodness, but that requires that he create a world filled with evil as well. And so it would make sense that God would allow some evil in the world. As Mackie (1982) puts the point:

If this counterpart relationship [between good and evil] is logically necessary, then a wholly good being would presumably not eliminate evil completely, even if he could do so, since this would logically require the disappearance of goodness also, including, presumably, his own. (Mackie 1982, 151)

Supposing that a world with a balance of good and evil in it is better overall than a world without either, God would have an all-things-considered reason to instantiate a world with evil.

Is C2 a successful theodicy? One might object that even if C2 is true it doesn't explain why God must create evil because nothing is impossible for God. There is nothing that God cannot do. Thus, God can create a world with goodness and without evil (Mackie 1955, 203–205). Hence, C2 is a failed theodicy because it does not meet the adequacy condition.

This objection basically boils down to a denial of C2 on the grounds that nothing is metaphysically impossible for God. Whether the objection is any good depends on the correct understanding of omnipotence. When theists say that God can do anything, to what are they committing themselves? In particular, can an omnipotent being do things that are metaphysically impossible? Historically, theists have disagreed on the issue. Some (perhaps Descartes) have thought that not even the laws of logic limit God's power. God could make a square circle if he wanted to. Others (perhaps the majority) have thought that to be omnipotent only means that one has the power to do anything that is metaphysically possible. For such a being there is really no "thing" that cannot be done – anything that is possible is doable.

Who is correct? Actually, it does not matter for present purposes. Suppose that God *cannot* do the impossible. If so, then this first objection to C2 fails. If it is truly impossible to have good without evil, then not even God can be faulted for failing to create a world with the former but not the latter. On the other hand, suppose that God *can* do the impossible (alternatively: nothing is impossible for God). Well, then, C2 will not explain why God had to allow evil in the world, but it is also hard to see how the existence of evil in the world serves as evidence against the existence of God. Remember, on this horn of the dilemma, the existence of evil in the world is not inconsistent with the existence of God because God can do the impossible (alternatively: nothing is impossible for God). Hence,

a morally perfect, all-powerful being could create a world filled with evil despite the fact that this is impossible.<sup>7</sup> Thus, no matter what the theist says about the limits of omnipotence, there is a response to the problem of evil given the truth of C2.

A better objection to C2 insists that it is false. In particular, one might complain that C2 is inconsistent with traditional theism. There are a couple of ways to raise this concern. First, traditional theism is committed to the view that God is good, that God exists necessarily and that everything else that exists depends for its existence on the free actions of God. This suggests that there is at least one possible world in which a good thing exists (God) but no other created thing. Second, many theists are committed to the view that the world as it was initially created by God was perfectly good and without evil. Either of these commitments makes it difficult to endorse C2.

Maintaining C2 in the face of these objections might require abandoning traditional theism. The most promising way to do so might be to endorse some form of dualism – the view that there is a good power in the world who is counterbalanced by an evil power in the world. This latter view has been endorsed by various historical religious groups including the Manicheans, Zoroastrians, and others. Saint Augustine – one of the most important early Christian figures – was once a Manichean. And C.S. Lewis says that next to Christianity, “Dualism is the manliest and most sensible creed on the market,” (Lewis 1952, 42).

Still, defending C2 by resorting to the claim that, in addition to God, there is an evil, anti-god is an important departure from traditional theism. And since it is only on traditional theism that there is a serious problem of evil, this is a capitulation on the part of the theist. For obviously, the existence of evil in the world is not surprising on the assumption that the world is ruled by both a good and an evil being in conflict with one another. The gist is that no traditional theist would accept C2 as a successful theodicy. In other words, a traditional theist is committed to the view that not every instantiation of goodness be matched with a unique instantiation of evil. So, on theism C2 is false.

Even if one does not accept this argument against C2, there is a different point to be made: even in the absence of reasons to think that C2 is false, *there is no reason to think that C2 is true*. On any plausible normative theory of the good, it is possible to have at least some good things without a corresponding evil thing. Goodness, we might put it, is not a zero-sum game.

But this confession is not as damaging to the counterpart theory as it first appears. As long as there are at least *some* goods that require the existence of evil, a pared-down version of the counterpart theodicy may yet explain the existence of evil in the world:

- C3: Necessarily, for every instantiation of *some types* of goods, there is an instantiation of evil.

7 Suppose God can do the impossible. One might object here that even though God *could* create a world filled with evil, it would still be *unlikely* that he would do so. In other words, while granting that the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of God, one could also insist that the existence of evil is unlikely given the existence of God. Hence, evil still functions as evidence against the existence of God. I do not think this objection works because I do not think that we can make sense out of probability judgments about what an agent would do once we grant that an agent can do the impossible. While there is not space to fully defend this claim here, the rough idea is that truths of probability are ultimately bounded by truths of possibility. If it is possible for the ball on a roulette wheel to fall on black and not fall on black at the same time in the same way (i.e., being on black does not metaphysically preclude not being on black), then we cannot make any probability assignments about whether or not the next roll will fall on black.

On this principle, not every good requires the existence of an evil (to avoid the earlier objections), but some forms or types of goods do. And on behalf of C3, there are certain goods that *do* seem to be metaphysically linked to certain evils. Take, for instance, the good of sympathy. It seems that it is impossible to be sympathetic unless there are people who are in need of sympathy. Or consider courage. It seems that it is impossible to be brave unless there are circumstances that are scary, hard, or threatening. Or consider the good of forgiveness. It seems that it is impossible to forgive others unless one has been wronged. Following Mackie (1982), we may call goods that *do not* metaphysically presuppose the existence of any evils “first-order goods” and goods that *do* metaphysically presuppose the existence of some evil or other “second-order goods” (p. 154). In fact, some have called this kind of limited counterpart theodicy a *higher-order goods theodicy* (e.g., Howard-Snyder 2008, 335).

One might object to the case for C3 along the following lines: sympathy does not require that anyone *actually* be hurt or suffering but only that one *believe* that another is hurt or suffering. The same can be said for courage: as long as one *believes* that one’s life is at stake, and so on, it is possible to show courage. However, even in this case, there is a first-order evil at work, namely massive deception. In a world in which I sacrifice my time, wealth, and abilities to courageously help another only to find out that it is a hoax, is a world in which there is a serious evil at play. Furthermore, even in this case, there is a good that is lacking: no one *actually* forgives, sympathizes, and so on. It is a good thing to *try* to forgive, be sympathetic, and so on, but it is also good to *succeed*. This success would be missing in a world where everything was a hallucination. Hence, we can say with some level of confidence that C3 is true: there are some second-order goods. But does C3 meet the other two conditions of a successful theodicy?

Consider first the adequacy condition. To meet this condition, C3 would have to sufficiently explain the evils in the world. There are two problems with such a suggestion. First, note that first-order evils “cut both ways”: just as first-order evils can give rise to second-order goods, they can also give rise to second-order evils (Mackie 1982, 155). Just as suffering and hardship can give rise to sympathy and courage, they can also give rise to cruelty and cowardice. Given that first-order evils give rise both to second-order goods and second-order evils, it is not clear how one could be justified in allowing first-order evils.

Second, it is reasonable to think that many of the first-order evils in the world fail to give rise to second-order goods. For example, not all instances of suffering give rise to sympathy, courage, and so on. In fact, it seems that very little suffering does so. In the example of sympathy, in order to sympathize with the suffering of others, I have to know about it. But the world is full of instances of suffering that go unnoticed by anyone at all.

The counterpart theodist may retreat to the following suggestion: yes, suffering in the world rarely corresponds with *actual* sympathy, and so on, but it always produces the *possibility* of sympathy, and so on. Furthermore, this possibility is, in itself, a good thing. The first of these claims is false: there is a lot of suffering in the world that does not even make things like sympathy possible (e.g., nonhuman suffering before humans had evolved). However, even if we granted both claims, at best, this retreat would show that C3 meets the adequacy condition at the cost of landing us in a very different problem: now it seems that C3 fails the compensating condition.

In some cases, we are justified in allowing an evil for the mere possibility of a good. For example, a parent is justified in allowing her sick child to undergo a painful experimental



treatment for the possibility of curing an otherwise fatal disease. However, there will be many cases in which we are not justified in allowing an evil for the mere possibility of a good. For example, a father cannot break his daughter's arm and offer the excuse that doing so made it possible that others sympathize with her. So while it may be true that all first-order evils always allow for the *possibility* of good things like sympathy, it is not true that the mere possibility of good things like sympathy is always *good enough* to provide an all-things-considered sufficient reason for allowing first-order evils.

Denying this claim – in other words, insisting that the evils in our world are justified because they make possible things like courage and sympathy – is hard to square with our ordinary moral judgments about other humans. I cannot purposefully hurt you and excuse my behavior by appeal to the claim that your suffering made sympathy possible. The mere possibility of sympathy, courage, and so on rarely compensates for suffering, terror, and so on. And therefore, even though C3 is true, it fails to meet either the adequacy or the compensating conditions. Hence, a theodicy based on C3 is a failure.

Perhaps there are other, more promising permutations of the counterpart theodicy than the three versions explored here. But until such views are both articulated and defended, it seems most reasonable to conclude that the counterpart theodicy is a failure.

## The Appreciation Theodicy

The counterpart theodicy makes a claim about the world: it is impossible for good to exist unless evil also exists. We have seen that this metaphysical claim is difficult to defend. However, the appreciation theodicy covers different ground. According to the appreciation theodicy, it is not that good cannot exist without evil (maybe it can), but we would not know/recognize/appreciate the good without the contrast of evil.<sup>8</sup> This is not a metaphysical claim but an epistemic one. And even J.L. Mackie – an early critic of the counterpart theodicy – admits that this sort of contrast principle is plausible:

There is still doubt of the correctness of the metaphysical principle that a quality must have a real opposite; I suggest that it is not really impossible that everything should be, say, red, that the truth is merely that if everything were red we should not notice redness, and so we should have no word for “red”; we observe and give names to qualities only if they have real opposites. (Mackie 1955, 205)

Thus even if the counterpart theodicy fails, the appreciation theodicy might provide a successful explanation for why the world contains evil despite the fact that God exists.

There is something plausible about the epistemic claim made by the appreciation theodicy. To use Mackie's example, if the entire world were red, it seems very unlikely that we would grasp the difference between red and nonred. We likely would not even have a word or concept that designated redness. If we only experienced pleasure, it seems unlikely that we would have a very good grasp on the difference between pleasure and pain. And there are many everyday examples of this sort of principle at work. Parents often operate under a similar sort of principle when they make their children do hard work. Judges often

<sup>8</sup> Insofar as recognizing goodness/evil is important for building character, one might view this kind of theodicy as a subset of the soul-crafting theodicy (see Chapter 14).



operate under a similar sort of principle when they force convicts into exposure with the victims of a crime. It is hard to be sympathetic until you have experienced what someone else is really going through. You do not appreciate the value of a college education until you have flipped burgers for a living.

It is clear how the appreciation theodicy would explain the existence of evil in the world. It is a good thing for us to recognize the difference between good and evil. Parents, mentors, and teachers spend a great deal of time teaching others about the difference between good and evil and teaching them how to pursue the former rather than the latter. And it is a good thing to be aware of important features of the world and to know when these features obtain. But, according to the appreciation theodicy, it was metaphysically impossible for God to create a world as good as ours with creatures who appreciated the difference between good and evil without allowing instances of evil.

Determining whether the appreciation theodicy is a success requires getting clear on the precise statement of the principle at issue and determining whether the principle meets the three conditions of a successful theodicy. Let's start with a formulation of the theodicy. As a first pass, we might try something like this:

A1: Necessarily, knowing that something has a certain feature, F, requires knowing that something is not-F.

According to A1, if I know that something is red, I must also know that something else is not-red. As applied to the problem of evil, if I know that something is good, then I know that something is evil. Since knowledge implies truth, the fact that I know something is good implies that evil is instantiated. Hence, A1 might explain why God has an all-things-considered reason for allowing evil.

However, A1 cannot form the basis for a successful appreciation theodicy because it is false. Daniel Howard-Snyder (2008) notes that the principle "incorrectly implies that if I know you have the feature of being a non-unicorn, then I know something has the opposite feature, namely the feature of being a unicorn" (p. 328). But, of course, there are no unicorns. And so the principle is false.

The problem with A1 is that it requires that the complement feature actually be instantiated. A weaker version of the principle is as follows:

A2: Necessarily, knowing that something has a certain feature, F, requires knowing what it is for something to be not-F.

The idea is that grasping a concept requires being able to distinguish the concept from its logical complement: to know what redness is, I must be able to distinguish between red and nonred. It need not be the case that nonredness be instantiated. And this version of a contrast principle seems plausible. As applied to the problem of evil, surely an agent who can successfully deploy the concept of goodness can recognize or appreciate the difference between good and evil.

Or maybe not. The complement of good is nongood. So perhaps all we need is a world in which there would be good things and nongood things, where nongood things could be either morally neutral states of affairs or evil states of affairs. But even if we concede that all non-good things are evil, A2 is not – by itself – enough to motivate an appreciation theodicy. If knowing that something is good only requires my having the *concept* of evil and not *actual* evil, then it is hard to see how this principle could explain the existence

of evil in the world. One might go further and insist that having the concept of an F requires that an F actually be instantiated, but this reply only moves us back to A1 and the problems faced there. Hence, even if A2 is true, it would fail the adequacy condition since it would explain only why we have the concept of evil and not why we have actual evil.

But perhaps these versions of the principle are misguided because they focus on *knowledge* instead of *appreciation*. Knowing that something is good does not require the existence of evil but being able to fully appreciate the goodness of something might. Hence, the best hope for the appreciation theodicy is to revise A2 to clearly connect the idea of appreciating the good with the requirement of actually existing evil:

A3: Necessarily, fully appreciating goodness requires the existence of evil.

A3 might be able to explain the evils in our world. But there is an ambiguity in A3 (and the other permutations) that is important to address up front: is this a claim about *metaphysical* possibility or *epistemic* possibility? If this is a metaphysical restriction, then the principle implies that not even God could fully appreciate goodness unless there were actual evils. This reading of A3 will make difficulties for traditional conceptions of God and his knowledge, and it appears to collapse A3 into a species of the counterpart theodicy considered earlier (namely C3). If this is an epistemic restriction, then this means only that humans are wired in such a way that we cannot fully appreciate goodness unless there is actual evil. While this reading of A3 does not make trouble for traditional theism, it does raise a different problem of evil: since it is possible that there be creatures that were able to fully appreciate good without the existence of evil, why did not God create those creatures instead of humans?

Furthermore, even the weaker, epistemic reading of A3 (or something like it) has been pointedly dismissed by other philosophers. For example, Peter van Inwagen (2006) introduces a view like this by noting that “Many undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame . . . seem inclined to say something like the following: if there were no evil, no one would appreciate – perhaps no one would even be aware of – the goodness of the things that *are* good” (pp. 68–69). What, according to van Inwagen, is wrong with such a theodicy?

... I have brought up the “appreciation” defense – which otherwise would not be worth spending any time on – to make [the following point:] It is not at all evident that an omnipotent creator would need to allow people really to experience *any* pain or grief or sorrow or adversity or illness to enable them to appreciate the good things in life. (van Inwagen 2006, 69)

But how could we appreciate the difference between good things and pain and sorrow unless we actually experienced the latter? Van Inwagen suggests that God might give us vivid and convincing nightmares of evil things. Michael Martin (1990) offers another way in which God could have gotten the good results of appreciation without requiring us to experience evil:

If God is all-powerful, it would seem that He could create us in such a way that we could appreciate and understand good to a high degree without actually experiencing evil. . . . God could have created all humans with a high degree of empathetic ability. God has already created some humans with the ability to produce imaginative art and literature that depicts evil. By viewing art and reading literature about evil, people created with highly sensitive empathetic ability could empathetically experience what is depicted and thus learn to appreciate good without experiencing evil. (Martin 1990, 450)

If van Inwagen and Martin are correct, it is possible to get the good results of appreciation/recognition without any actual evil in the world. Hence, A3 is false.

But are the critics of A3 correct? Take Peter van Inwagen's criticism. He claims that the appreciation theodicy fails because there are other ways for God to get us to know what evil and suffering are like (e.g., he could give us vivid dreams of evil things). But there are at least two important replies. First of all, it is reasonable to think that vivid and convincing nightmares of a hellish world *are themselves evil*. This is why we comfort our children who suffer from such nightmares and would eliminate them if we could. So van Inwagen's suggestion seems to bolster the case for A3 – fully appreciating the good requires the existence of evil (if only in the form of evil nightmares).

But, second, when we consider van Inwagen's own preferred response to the argument from evil, we find that he makes a similar move. What justifies God in allowing the evils we see in the world according to van Inwagen?

For human beings to cooperate with God in this rescue operation, they must know that they need to be rescued. They must know what it means to be separated from him. And what it means to be separated from God is to live in a world of horrors. (van Inwagen 2006, 88)

His answer is that evil is required so that we *know* that we need to be rescued and we *know* what it means to live in a world separated from God. But if van Inwagen is correct that God could have given us the knowledge that we need to be rescued and the knowledge of what it means to be separated by God simply by giving us vivid dreams, and so on. If the appreciation theodicy fails because actual evils are not required for the goods of appreciation/knowledge, then van Inwagen's defense fails for a similar reason: actual evils are not required for the goods of appreciation/knowledge of what it means to be separated from God.

Thus, in defense of A3, we find that even some of the critics of the appreciation theodicy make similar suggestions in other contexts. And there is something plausible about the principle: it is very hard to see how we would ever fully appreciate health without illness, wealth without poverty, love without hate. In a world in which we dealt with illness only in our dreams or in literature, it seems unlikely that we would fully appreciate the fact that we were healthy. After all, what happens in dreams and stories is one thing; what happens in reality is quite another. It is hard to fear something that can only happen in a dream or in a fairy tale.

Suppose we grant, then, that A3 is true. The theodicy would still be a failure because it meets neither the adequacy nor the compensating conditions. Consider the former. Even if it is true that we would not fully appreciate the good without the instantiation of some evils or other, it is highly implausible to think that diminishing the scope of the *actual* evils in our world would significantly affect our appreciation of the good. For example, reducing the amount of breast cancer victims by half would not affect our ability to appreciate the good. So it is implausible that A3 can provide a good explanation for the extent of evils in our world, and hence it fails the adequacy condition.

Next, consider the compensating condition. Is it true that the badness of the actual features of evil on earth (including the amount of evil, type of evil, distribution of evil, etc.) is compensated by the goodness of our appreciation of the good? Well, in some cases, we are justified in allowing an evil for the good of recognition, appreciation, and so on. For example, a parent is justified in requiring his son to do yard work in an effort to cultivate in him an appreciation of the value of work, a sense of responsibility, and so on.

However, there will be many cases in which we are not justified in allowing an evil for the mere appreciation of the good. Consider again the father of a child. Suppose he purposefully allows his child to break her arm, causing extreme pain and duress for the girl. And suppose that we confront him about his choice. "Well," he says, "she didn't really fully appreciate her health or the pleasures of a normal body, but this experience will deepen her appreciation of both."<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, we can agree with him: surely the girl's appreciation *will* be deepened by the experience. But on the other hand, does this newfound appreciation compensate for the pain and suffering that she will endure? Few will agree. This argument from analogy suggests that while it is sometimes justifiable to allow evils in order to secure the good of full appreciation, this is not always the case.

Insisting that all (or most) of the evils in our world are justified because they cultivate an appreciation of the good is hard to square with our ordinary moral judgments about other humans. I cannot purposefully hurt you and excuse my behavior by appeal to the claim that you will now more fully appreciate the good. And therefore even if we grant that A3 is true, it fails to meet either the adequacy or the compensating conditions. Hence, a theodicy based on A3 is a failure.

Perhaps there are other, more promising permutations of the appreciation theodicy than the three versions explored here. But until such views are both articulated and defended, it seems most reasonable to conclude that, like the counterpart theodicy, the appreciation theodicy is a failure.

## Acknowledgments

Nathan Ballantyne, Ian Evans, Klaas Kraay, Dugald Owen, and the audience at the 2012 Mountain-Pacific meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers (especially Amy Seymour and Eleonore Stump) have provided extremely helpful suggestions and/or feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. Additionally, a rigorous commentary from Daniel Howard-Snyder made me want to cry in my pillow and start over again. The final result is a much better chapter!

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9 The intuition that the father's action is not morally justifiable can be strengthened if we add to the story that the father had the ability to provide his daughter with "vivid nightmares," and so on that would provide her with the same level of appreciation of her health.

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# Free Will and Soul-Making Theodicies

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Imagine that your 18-year-old son has made his way through some standard adolescent hardships that include his distancing himself from you as his parent. You understand this movement (in your calmer and saner moments) as an overall healthy transition crucial to his autonomy. He is becoming his own person with his own will and his own aspirations and projects. Now imagine that the two of you are passing each other in the kitchen when he spontaneously embraces you in a long and firm hug, punctuated by a tender, “I love you.” In light of his burgeoning maturation into a free adult, you can imagine experiencing an overwhelming sense of satisfaction. Of course, there have been countless hugs and expressions of love throughout his 18 years and all of them have had their charms and enjoyments. But what might be especially satisfying about this particular instance is its spontaneity. It might seem to be arising out of the very autonomy he has been establishing. That is, it can seem to have the special value of being a *free* response to you.

Similarly, you can probably imagine watching your son overcome some fairly robust obstacles in ways that reveal his growth into a better and more mature person. Suppose, for example, that he has fought through some moderate depression by way of disciplined engagement in professional counseling and some personal commitments to turning his attention to the needs of others. When you watch him drag himself off to a volunteer tutoring program at which he helps elementary school kids with homework, you might very well be struck by the thought that he is indeed becoming a person whom you actually admire. Are the obstacles that your imaginary son has been forced to face accidental to his becoming this sort of admirable person? Not obviously. That is, your son’s emerging character might seem to enjoy the special value of being somewhat *hard-won in the face of resistance*.

At the heart of any theodicy is the judgment that there are goods so valuable that they can plausibly be thought to justify God in seeking to secure them – even at the cost of the world’s horrors (see Chapter 12). A successful theodicy will, then, have to make it reasonable to believe *both* that the target goods really are so valuable as to justify the existence of

horrible evils *and* that there was no way for God to secure these goods without causing or permitting the evils. That is, a theodicy must offer plausible support for two propositions:

*The Value Proposition:* A world containing these (or comparable) goods and these (or comparable) evils is better than any world containing neither.

*The Impossibility Proposition:* It was impossible for God to secure a world containing these (or comparable) goods without it also containing these (or comparable) evils.

The goal of this chapter is to canvass and assess the interrelated appeals, adumbrated earlier in the vignettes of your imaginary son, to the value of free will and the value of moral and spiritual development in recent efforts to support these propositions. It is perhaps worth noting that, given the centrality of freedom and soul-making in historic and contemporary theodicies, this will amount to exploring and testing the strength of the backbone of nearly any promising theodicy.

By way of structure and strategy, it is convenient that the two most prominent and exhaustive contemporary efforts at theodicy – those developed by John Hick and Richard Swinburne – both emphasize free will and soul-making in their respective efforts to support the value and impossibility propositions (though Hick certainly places greater specific weight on soul-making while Swinburne’s theodicy makes a wider and more explicit appeal to the value of free will).<sup>1</sup> A fruitful way forward then can begin with a careful presentation of their distinctive and influential views followed by reflection on the substantive challenges theodicies in their spirit face.

## Hick’s Theodicy

John Hick’s influential monograph *Evil and the God of Love* appeared in 1966, establishing a contemporary systematic theodicy in the Irenaean rather than the Augustinian tradition.<sup>2</sup> (see Chapter 12) According to Augustine (and Augustinians), a significant part of the explanation for the world’s evils is to be found in the free choice of the first human beings to act contrary to God’s explicit plan, thereby “falling” from grace and setting in motion a degenerate cosmic order. Though Irenaeus does not appear to have engaged formally in the project of theodicy, his outlook, Hick thinks, can be seen to set a different agenda for the theodicist. This is because Irenaeus envisions early human beings not as the idealized and robustly free creatures of Augustine’s prefall anthropology, but as primitive agents whom God must raise up to moral, intellectual, and religious maturity through a developmental process. As Hick has emphasized, the Augustinian approach to theodicy has dominated the Christian tradition. In this respect, we can think of Hick as issuing a minority report. This minority report makes distinctive appeals to both free will and soul-making.

1 The theodicies of both Hick and Swinburne (and especially of Swinburne) appeal to considerations beyond free will and soul-making about which I will say little other than that a number of these considerations are treated in detail elsewhere in this volume.

2 The second edition of Hick’s monograph was published in 1978 and it to this edition that I will be referring throughout this chapter.



## Hick on Free Will

To develop Hick's image of human freedom, it is perhaps helpful to begin by sketching his overarching strategy of theodicy. According to Hick, what ultimately justifies God in permitting or causing the evils we encounter is that they are in some sense necessary for our development into the kind of morally mature beings God intends (rightly and graciously) for us to become. Human beings, both as a species and individually, are not only created in the *image* of God but are also teleologically directed toward taking on the *likeness* of God. The divine work in human beings is, then, a two-step process beginning with our creation in moral and spiritual immaturity and culminating in our moral perfection. This moral perfection, however, cannot be brought about in us without our going through a process of growth and maturation. The sufferings of this life are essential features of the training ground we need to navigate in order to become good, deeply good, and good in the highest way possible consistent with our humanity. As Hick notes:

[t]he value-judgment that is implicitly being invoked here is that one who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created *ab initio* in a state of either innocence or virtue. (Hick 1978, 255)

Hick (1978, 256) emphasizes that free will plays a necessary role in this process of becoming truly good. After all, it "is not taking place – it is important to add – by a natural and inevitable evolution, but through a hazardous adventure in individual freedom." An interpretive question emerges here. In what sense, according to Hick, is free will necessary? One possibility is that free will is necessary because nothing properly called moral goodness could really be achieved without it. It just would not count as goodness if it were not achieved through freedom. Given the quote earlier regarding the value judgment he takes to be implicit in his theorizing, however, this does not appear to be Hick's view. Instead, free will appears to be necessary only for the *most valuable kind* of goodness. God might have created beings who were morally good and who also lacked free will. But such beings could not rise to the level of the highest humanly possible goodness.

Hick's most illuminating treatment of the nature of free will emerges from his discussion of the lively debate over the free will defense that burst out in the 1950s and 1960s. Against the free will defense, both Antony Flew and J.L. Mackie argued that God could have, and therefore should have, created a world in which human beings were free but also exercised their freedom only for the good; that is, in which they never freely chose against moral rightness (Flew 1955; Mackie 1955). At the heart of these arguments is their commitment to a compatibilistic (indeed, soft-deterministic) conception of free will. In the spirit of the ordinary language philosophy of their day, Flew and Mackie contended that all we mean when we deploy the terminology of "free will" is that the behavior in question is not externally constrained. A person is acting freely as long as nothing gets between her choice and her action; as long as nothing obstructs or interferes with the execution of her will. If this were all that is meant by calling a particular choice "free," then there would be no problem with God making us both free and such as always to choose rightly. To see this, notice that God's installing in us, for example, an always-effective desire to do what is right would neither constitute nor entail an external constraint. Under these conditions, nothing, after all, would be getting between our choices and our actions. In fact, nothing *could* get

between our choices and our actions, *ex hypothesi*. Nothing could ever obstruct the *execution* of our wills. This, then, is the world God should have made: one in which human beings were free but were determined by God always freely to choose rightly.

In a surprising and revealing response, Hick does not insist that there would be a contradiction involved in God's creating free creatures who always choose rightly. This is because he allows that God might have constructed free human beings with a resistance to temptation so profound as to insulate them from wrongdoing. However, Hick believes that he can nevertheless find a nearby contradiction in the Flew–Mackie proposal that God ought to have deployed the divine power and wisdom to make moral evil impossible. To bring out this contradiction, Hick emphasizes that from the traditional theistic perspective, God wants human beings not only to act well toward each other, but also to respond appropriately to the love and good purposes of God. Thus, while Hick grants that God might be able to insure free moral goodness between human beings, he nevertheless goes on to ask: "Is it logically possible for God so to make men that they will freely respond to Himself in love and trust and faith?" (Hick (1978, 274). And it is to this question that Hick is prepared to answer no. In essence, then, it is not the demands of interpersonal morality that require an incompatibilist conception of free will, but instead it is the deeper demands of free relationship to God that do so.

Hick is aware of the philosophical tensions associated with the position on free will toward which his arguments here seem to be leading him. On the one hand, free relationship to God appears to require that nothing external to an agent determine the direction of her will. On the other hand, the simple denial of this kind of determination would seem to render an agent's behavior random or uncontrolled, which would mean that the behavior (say, of putting faith in God) would not count as free and responsible either. Thus, Hick is pressed to seek a middle way, a third concept of freedom that splits the difference between antecedent determination and randomness. Fortunately, he believes that "[t]here is such a concept, and, indeed, it is the one that seems intuitively most adequate to our ordinary experience as moral agents. It is, however, not easily defined. It is roughly the idea of limited creativity" (Hick (1978, 276). If an agent does possess this form of limited creativity, then

Whilst a free action arises out of the agent's character it does not arise in a fully determined and predictable way. It is largely but not fully prefigured in the previous state of the agent. For the character is itself partially formed and sometimes partially re-formed in the very moment of free decision. (Hick 1978, 276)

Hick, we can now see, is committed to a robustly libertarian conception of human free will which he takes to be essential to his theodicy<sup>3</sup> (see Chapter 28). Since free will in the libertarian key makes possible a distinctively valuable form of self-creation, it contributes to the plausibility case for the value proposition. Given that such freedom cannot simply be overrun – even by omnipotence – and remain free, the appeal to it can contribute substantially to the case for the impossibility proposition.

3 In a footnote, Hick links his own view explicitly to classical libertarianism, identifying C.A. Campbell's (1957) *On Selfhood and Godhood* as "[t]he fullest and most adequate exposition and defence" of the conception of freedom he takes himself to be deploying (p. 276).

The epistemology here will, however, turn out to be important. This is because Hick admits that he does not know how to prove or establish that human beings enjoy this sort of free will. The best we can do is to argue for this freedom in “philosophically questionable ways” underwritten by “our directly intuited status as responsible beings.” Slightly more explicitly, he claims that, “[w]e know such creativity from within in our own moments of responsible choice; and we can infer it as a presupposition of Christian theology. But it may be that it cannot be independently established by philosophical analysis” (Hick (1978, 277)). This is a point to which it is essential we return, since a successful theodicy will have to show that both the value proposition and the impossibility proposition are not merely possibly true but are *plausibly* true.

## Hick on Soul-Making

We can return now to the deep teleology at the center of Hick’s theodicy – and that is indeed at the center of any soul-making approach. God is aiming to bring into existence that immeasurably good state in which free and rational creatures are in the richest possible intimacy with their Creator. According to Hick, this is a state that we can only enter into *freely*, and thus the importance of libertarian freedom, as we have already emphasized. But, in addition, Hick claims that this is a state that we can only enter into if we are deeply good, only if our souls have undergone the proper transformation.<sup>4</sup> Now, this deep goodness is, according to Hick, *essentially* developmental. It is not the sort of goodness that one could have simply implanted in one or in the possession of which one could arise out of the swamp. And, again, it is not as if Hick thinks there could be no such thing as implanted goodness or a virtuous swamp man. Rather, Hick thinks that implanted goodness or swamp man virtue would not be as good as they would be if, instead, they had been hard-won through actual moral experience. Thus, he claims that,

... it is an ethically reasonable judgment, even though in the nature of the case not one that is capable of demonstrative proof, that human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process. (Hick 1978, 256)

This means that, insofar as God’s worthy goal is to give creatures the opportunity to cooperate with divinity in achieving this highly prized goodness, God will have to place them in an environment that includes genuine moral obstacles and risk. On the assumption, then, that God is seeking to develop moral saints rather than to guarantee a certain amount of pleasure, the question for theodicy shifts. Initially, it may have seemed that our question was, “Does human existence have enough hedonic value to be permitted by a maximally loving being?” Now we can see, however, that the question must be something more like, “Is the world as we find it a reasonable moral training ground?” Hick attempts to provide a plausible positive answer to this question.

4 Hick’s talk of “souls” and “soul-making” does not commit him to any particular ontology of the human person, as far as I can tell. What he appears to mean by the soul is something like the moral core or character of a person that is changed and fortified by moral and spiritual formation. Parenthetically, Hick credits the poet John Keats with the phrase “vale of soul-making” (Hick 1978, 259, note 1).

The answer begins with Hick's suggestion that human beings would need to begin their development at some distance from God; so to speak, outside God's over-Lording presence. This is because the recognized presence of infinite goodness would threaten to undermine the truly free process by which human beings must make their way into moral and spiritual maturity. Of course, the Creator and Sustainer of all things seen and unseen cannot be at any *metaphysical* distance from creation; the only conceivable sort of distance human beings could have from their creator, then, would be *epistemic*. This means that the world will have to be such that human beings are not transparently aware of God, since a proper training ground must be one in which the almighty trainer is not obviously watching.

Furthermore, both pain and suffering will have to be live possibilities in this training ground. Pain appears to be necessary, according to Hick, as the principle biological mechanism for getting creatures like us to care enough about the exercise of our own capacities and the development of our skills. Without pain (think of hunger pangs or the pains of disease and aging), we would have no reason to seek food, cultivate the land, invent medications, or take on temporally extended projects requiring planning, will power, and teamwork. Without pain, "[t]here would be," Hick claims, "nothing to avoid and nothing to seek; no occasion for cooperation or mutual help; no stimulus to the development of culture or the creation of civilization" (Hick (1978, 307). Suffering more generally appears to be required for the instantiation of the most robust moral concepts like cruelty, injustice, and unfaithfulness (on the negative side) and courage, compassion, and perseverance (on the positive side). Our free decisions between such serious options make our deep moral character, for good or ill: the possibility of the ill being a necessary consequence of the possibility of the good.

We should note here Hick's treatment of what he calls dysteleological pain and suffering. Evils of the dysteleological sort seem not to be able to be justified by their contribution to soul-making either because they are suffered at random (and with no correspondence to desert) or because their concomitant sufferings are so massive or so targeted as to undermine the very moral goods they are supposed to make possible. In response to such evils, Hick is forced to invoke mystery. To call their occurrence mysterious is to allow that no explanation for each particular instance may be possible; but it is not to abandon the project of theodicy altogether. This is because the appeal to mystery may be independently motivated by the principles of the soul-making theodicy itself. After all, "[i]t may be that the very mysteriousness of this life is an important aspect of its character as a sphere of soul-making" (Hick (1978, 334).

To complete the teleology, Hick argues that his Irenaean theodicy requires an optimistic eschatology. There must indeed be life after physical death; life so good that its attainment will be found to have been worth every hardship and horror through which we have passed on the way to it. In fact, Hick's eschatology is maximally optimistic. *Every* human being will ultimately enter into the supreme good of eternal life in the presence of the supremely loving Creator. Hick recognizes that there is some potential philosophical slippage between his position here and his commitment to libertarian free will. Still, he argues that an omnibenevolent God will eventually be able to draw each individual into the beatific vision by a process that respects human freedom.

Thus, for Hick, the logic of freedom and soul-making are supposed to make the impossibility proposition plausible while the great goods of free will and moral excellence (together with the guarantee of union with God) provide the necessary support for the value proposition.

## Swinburne's Theodicy

I turn now to Richard Swinburne who has made important contributions to philosophical reflection on evil and theodicy throughout the development of his impressive natural theology. In his *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (1998), he systematizes these reflections into a comprehensive whole around the twin values of free will and what he calls "being of use." His distinctive conception of usefulness goes beyond soul-making, but does include it, as we will see. It is appropriate then to consider Swinburne's theodicy here since it appeals explicitly (even if not only) to the two crucial elements that give this chapter its charge.

## Swinburne on Free Will

Like Hick, but with more explicit emphasis, Swinburne endorses a libertarian conception of free will. In characterizing this brand of freedom, he says:

By an agent having free will in the libertarian sense . . . I mean that which intentional action he does is not fully caused – either through some process of natural causation (i.e. in virtue of laws of nature) or in some other way (e.g. by an agent such as God acting from outside the natural order). In that case whatever the current state of the Universe (including the agent's beliefs and desires) and the causes at work in the Universe (including those whose operation is codified in laws of nature), it remains possible either that the agent will do the action in question, or that he will refrain from doing it. (Swinburne 1998, 33)

This sets some of the crucial parameters within which Swinburne attempts to support the impossibility proposition, since according to this account of free will it is incompatible with either causal or divine determination. As for the value proposition, libertarian free will also makes an important contribution. In emphasizing the goodness of intentional action, Swinburne insists that:

We value the willingly generous action, the naturally honest, spontaneously loving action. But we value even more that the pursuit of the good should result from a free choice of the agent between equally good actions, that is, one resulting from the exercise of (libertarian) free will. It is good for any agent to have such a free choice; for that makes him an ultimate source of the way things happen in the Universe. He is no longer totally at the mercy of forces from without, but is himself an autonomous mini-creator. (Swinburne 1998, 84)

Notice that although Swinburne and Hick appear to agree in the judgment that libertarian free will is valuable, they appear to focus on different *kinds* of value. Hick, you will recall, puts the emphasis on the way in which libertarian freedom makes possible an especially valuable form of relationship with God. In this respect, the value of the freedom seems to be largely instrumental. Swinburne, by contrast, seems to be calling on us to recognize the intrinsic good of having this kind of freedom, of being mini-creators, quite apart from the further goods it makes possible. This is not to say that Hick fails to recognize the intrinsic good of free will or that Swinburne has no appreciation for its instrumental value. Rather, the point here is only that they appear to differ in emphasis.

In addition, Swinburne appreciates that libertarian free will *simpliciter* is likely to be of little help to theodicy. Suppose, for example, that human beings had possessed full-blooded

libertarian free will but only with respect “soup or salad,” or only with respect to which internet radio station to listen to, or only with respect to which route to take home from work. With the scope of freedom limited in such ways, it is very hard to see how it could be called upon to do much work in making it plausible that the evils of this world had to be permitted even by a maximally good being. Thus, Swinburne suggests that the value of libertarian freedom is increased when its scope is extended.

But the good of freely forwarding the good is better if the agent has a free choice between a greater and a lesser good; better still if he has a free choice between the good and bad, and even more so if the possibility of doing bad includes the possibility of doing wrong . . . not just between alternative goods. (Swinburne 1998, 84)

If agents have a choice between good and bad, then, on Swinburne’s terminology, they have *serious free will*. If the choice also includes the possibility of wrong action, then they have *very serious free will*. Thus, the point of the quote earlier is to insist on the unique and elevated value of very serious free will. In fact, Swinburne goes on (extending the scope and value of freedom even further) to suggest that, “having a free will which can make a big difference to the world is a greater good than having one which can only make a small difference” (Swinburne 1998, 88).

One of the more intriguing aspects of Swinburne’s account of free will is its requirement of bad desires. In short, Swinburne argues that agents who are able to act for reasons will always act in accordance with what they take to be the best reason, as long as no counter-normative influences get in the way. Thus, if an agent is going to be free to perform an action that he does not deem best, then he will have to have a desire to perform that action. And if the agent has accurate moral beliefs, then the desire he will need will have to be a bad one, that is, a desire to act contrary to best-ness, against morality. Swinburne concludes that, “[w]ith such desires, that is, temptations, alone can he have a free choice of pursuing the best or not pursuing the best,” (Swinburne 1998, 86). In fact, “for agents to have free will of any kind other than very unserious free will, they need desires to do actions of strengths out of proportion to the goodness of the actions desired” (Swinburne 1998, 134). This will mean that God will have to give us some fairly strong bad desires (desires for what is bad or wrong) in order for us to enjoy any serious free will.

With Swinburne’s account of free will now made explicit, we can turn briefly to its role and epistemology. As I have suggested already, the appeal to free will is essential to Swinburne’s efforts to support what I have been calling the impossibility proposition. The metaphor he deploys here is of a straitjacket by which even God is bound – a logical straitjacket.

The most obvious example of this logical straitjacket to which even God is subject is that he cannot give us very serious free will, i.e. the free will to choose between good and wrong, without the natural possibility (unprevented by God) that we will do wrong. (Swinburne 1998, 127)

Thus, the *fact* of moral evil is to be accounted for in terms of the value of free will even if its *range* requires further explanation. This further explanation is to be found in the value for free agents of their having increased responsibility, by way of their choices, for what happens in the world and to each other.

As essential as libertarian free will is to Swinburne’s theodicy, however, his defense of the position that we do in fact enjoy this kind of freedom is surprisingly impressionistic.

In short, his defense of the doctrine amounts to this: “Because of the weight of Christian tradition in its favour, and the absence of good philosophico-scientific arguments to the contrary, I am therefore taking the doctrine that humans have free will for granted” (Swinburne 1998, 107).<sup>5</sup> And here it is perhaps worth noting the striking similarities with Hick’s assessment of the epistemic situation vis-à-vis libertarian free will.

## Swinburne on Soul-Making

We should now take explicit notice of the fact that Swinburne is less committed to a purely Irenaean theodicy than is Hick. Swinburne’s approach is, in fact, more properly considered a hybrid view since he aims “to accept a historical Fall, and give it some role in [his] theodicy, but not the kind of prominence which Augustine gave to it” (Swinburne 1998, 41). With this said, however, he is clearly intending to get some leverage for his own theodicy from the soul-making tradition:

Very many Christian writers have stressed the value of suffering for the human beings who suffer, in enabling them to form their souls for good. By showing courage and sympathy in the face of their suffering and that of others, people can become naturally good people. That is a theme especially prominent in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which I shall warmly endorse. (Swinburne 1998, 42)

The challenge for understanding Swinburne here is to identify this thread in particular as it is embedded in the wider tapestry of his appeal to the general value of being of use.

What does Swinburne have in mind when referring to the value of being of use? By way of explanation, he says that it is good for a person to contribute to the wider good “either through freely exercising power in the right way, or through doing it naturally and spontaneously, or even by being used as the vehicle of a good purpose” (Swinburne 1998, 101). As I read him, these three disjuncts are mentioned in order of decreasing value. It is more valuable to contribute by free action than by natural disposition, and more valuable to contribute by natural disposition than by being a passive conduit. Still, the basic idea (which Swinburne grants sits uncomfortably in the contemporary moral mind) is that it is good for us (and indeed for any creature) to be instrumentally related to the good *simpliciter*, whether intentionally or not. With regard to soul-making, the thing to see is that the value of human moral development is only one among others to which a creature’s life might contribute; again, either intentionally or not. This means that contributing to the conditions for and possibility of soul-making is only one (admittedly important) way of being of use.

Keeping our focus on the value of being of use *for soul-making*, it will help to see that, for Swinburne, “[a] person’s character is her system of desires and beliefs (principally moral beliefs)” (Swinburne 1998, 91). Since to form our souls is to form our characters, the good of suffering can be found in its consequences for both our beliefs and desires. With respect to our moral beliefs, our encounters with concrete human suffering, together with our

<sup>5</sup> By this point in his monograph, Swinburne is comfortable glossing libertarian free will simply as “free will.” In fairness, he does make some effort in Chapter 2 both to show that early Christian thinkers (prior, that is, to Augustine) operated with a libertarian conception and to dismiss compatibilism as a live option for theodicy.



mechanism of natural sympathy, provide us with essential opportunities for unique forms of transformation. To experience famine, or divorce, or disease (either as participants or in direct sympathy) is to be given the chance to grow in our moral understanding – to get better beliefs about what is right and wrong, good and bad, and about the substantive rankings within these categories. More important than the effect on our moral beliefs, however, are the effects of our experience of suffering on our moral desires. For it is by the cultivation of good desires and the diminution of bad ones that good character is formed. Good character, in turn,

... is the sort of character which responds readily to suffering (in others and in one's self) in the right way. Natural evil provides the opportunity not merely to be heroic but to make ourselves naturally heroic. Without a significant amount of natural evil, we simply would not have the opportunity to show patience and sympathy on the heroic scale required for us to form heroically good characters. It is a great good for us to be able, through free choice over time, to form such characters. (Swinburne 1998, 169)

Though Swinburne's concern with natural goodness is not as obviously related to the greater good of union with God as is Hick's, the connection is still present. In a note responding to Schellenberg's hiddenness argument for atheism, Swinburne claims that if people have formed their character well, then "they will have a natural propensity to show gratitude and respect when it is due, and so be ready to worship their creator, if they learn of his existence." Furthermore, he allows that, "[t]hey may not have that opportunity until after death . . ." (Swinburne 1998, 257–258). This brings out two important parallels with Hick. First, Swinburne can clearly be seen to be joining Hick in the appeal to the deep teleology of (or at least the possibility of) final divine-human intimacy. Second, Swinburne also appears to be agreeing with Hick in granting if not the need for, then at least, again, the possibility of an eschatological, postmortem component in his theodicy.

On these points, however, Swinburne's eschatology is not as optimistic as Hick's. What Swinburne appears to accept is that God could remain perfectly good even while granting to a human being only a limited temporal opportunity to make a decision about her eternal destiny. In fact, God's goodness may require this because anything less would amount to a failure to give our wills their proper respect.

For if God refused to allow someone to develop an irreformably bad character, that would be depriving her of an ultimate choice of the sort of person she is to be. If God always left the bad open to good influences, that would be refusing to recognize an ultimate choice by an independent moral agent. (Swinburne 1998, 121)

This does not entail, for Swinburne, a traditional doctrine of hell since it is compatible with God's causing some people to pass out of existence altogether. Given many of the noises he makes about this, it would not be terribly uncharitable to describe annihilationism as something like his preferred view. Thus, while Swinburne allows for extended postmortem soul-building – especially for compensation when a particular human being has not received a fair share of goodness in earthly life – there is an ultimate limit on it. In any case, the contrast here with Hick is clear. With respect to each human life, Hick is able to appeal to the final good of the attainment of the beatific vision in justifying God's permission of the person's sufferings. Swinburne, however, is not. And it is, at least in part, for this reason that his theodicy must go beyond soul-making.

On Swinburne's view, then, the logic of free will and soul-making may be enough to support the impossibility proposition. But the value proposition ultimately needs support from considerations that cannot be mustered within a framework limited to the goods of freedom and personal moral development – and thus his wider appeal to the value of being of use.

## Challenges Facing Free Will and Soul-Making Theodicies

I turn now to the prospects for a successful theodicy that combines the values of free will and soul-making. There are, no doubt, points at which to attack the specific proposals made by Hick and Swinburne, respectively. For example, we might wonder, in Hick's case, why God should not have given us compatibilist free will with respect to our interpersonal relations and libertarian free will only with respect to our relationship to God (thereby eliminating, we can presume, a great deal of human suffering while still preserving the great good of the sort of relationship to God Hick describes). In Swinburne's case, we might wonder if our having libertarian free will requires, as he insists, our having strong counter-moral desires or if the value of temptation-honed choice is really as high as he represents it.<sup>6</sup> And with both Hick and Swinburne, there are specific questions about how their respective appeals to soul-making go about justifying the apparently vast amount of animal suffering the world contains.<sup>7</sup> I will set particulars of this sort aside, however, and focus on challenges faced by any brand of theodicy that appeals to both free will and soul-making.

### The Challenges of Free Will

To begin, the proponent of a theodicy who appeals to a libertarian conception of free will must not shirk the responsibility to do two things: (1) make a compelling case for the additional value of this sort of freedom over its compatibilist, revisionist, and skeptical alternatives, and (2) make it plausible that we enjoy this sort of freedom.<sup>8</sup> The first relates to the charge to support the value proposition: the second to the charge to support the impossibility proposition.

With respect to this first responsibility, we should keep in mind that a recurring complaint made against libertarianism by compatibilists is that the view is simply unmotivated. That is, these critics regularly insist that nothing of real value turns on whether the kind of freedom we possess is (or is not) compatible with thoroughgoing determinism. This is at least part of the point of the subtitle of Daniel Dennett's influential book *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (1984). But it is not only compatibilists who have

6 With respect to the second conjunct, Richard Gale complains of "Swinburne's vast exaggeration of the value of choosing freely under severe temptation" in his critical review of *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Gale 2000, 216).

7 Maller (2009) raises specific concerns about animal suffering for the theodicies of both Hick and Swinburne (among others).

8 Can a theodicy succeed that makes no appeal to libertarian free will, either because it makes no appeal at all to free will or because it appeals only to a compatibilist conception of free will? This is a good question (or set of questions) that I have to set aside.

raised questions about just how valuable libertarian freedom really is. Derk Pereboom (2001), a self-described “hard-incompatibilist,” has developed an extended defense of the thesis that human beings do not possess free will (of either the compatibilist or libertarian sort), but that this is not so bad – because nothing much is lost in our giving up on free will (see Chapter 15). In particular, he argues that we can keep much of morality, of law and punishment, of interpersonal relationships, and of the meaning of our lives. Pereboom does admit that we will not be able to keep *everything* we may want if we give up on free will and, therefore, there is space for the proponent of a free will theodicy to make the case for distinctive value. But the case needs to be made; and it needs to be made in such a way that the value of libertarian free will can be seen to outstretch the value of its denial *significantly* since it is in part this additional value that is supposed to be justifying God in permitting much of the evil parasitic upon this freedom.

Furthermore, keep in mind that it would appear to be either infelicitous or impertinent to argue, in this context, that libertarian free will is especially valuable because appeal to it is necessary for a theistic response to the problem of evil. Presumably, the standard justification to which the theist appeals when invoking libertarian free will is the special moral or interpersonal value it possesses or makes possible, as we have seen with both Hick and Swinburne. To respond to the challenge to support the value proposition by emphasizing the necessity of libertarianism for a satisfying reply to the problem of evil would be, in essence, to double-count whatever moral or interpersonal values this kind of freedom is initially thought to have or make possible. If one has reason to doubt that libertarian freedom makes possible distinctive moral value, then one has reason to doubt that the appeal to libertarianism will in fact help with the problem of evil. Thus, there would be none of this secondary value (of helping with the problem of evil) at all. On this point, Manuel Vargas (2004) has suggested that libertarianism continues to remain on the contemporary philosophical radar largely by virtue of the support it receives from theistic philosophers – for whom the problem of evil is a serious issue.<sup>9</sup> This sociological fact, if it is a fact, would seem to intensify the need for the proponent of a free will theodicy to establish the additional value of libertarian freedom in dialectically sensitive terms.<sup>10</sup>

The second responsibility of those who hope to follow in the footsteps of Hick and Swinburne is, as I have already suggested, to show more than that it is merely possible that human beings possess libertarian freedom. While establishing this possibility is indeed sufficient for the project of defense, a theodicy purports at least to make it plausible that God is justified in permitting the evils we find in the world. As such, a free will theodicy will have to go beyond demonstrating the internal coherence of the brand of freedom on which it rests to demonstrating the plausibility of its actual existence. This is a very difficult project in its own right.

To see the initial difficulty, remember that both Hick and Swinburne take themselves to be getting some traction for their appropriation of libertarianism from the role it has played in historic Christianity. Again, Hick claims about libertarian free will that, “we can

9 Vargas (2004, 408) announces that, “[t]here is nearly always an unremarked upon elephant that lurks in rooms where philosophers discuss free will. In this instance, the elephant may be more difficult to ignore. The elephant is the role of religion in motivating and sustaining various libertarian accounts.”

10 Some not insubstantial support for Vargas’ sociological claim here can be found in the results of the PhilPapers Survey conducted in 2009 according to which the correlation between theism and libertarianism among professional philosophers is extraordinary (<http://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl>).

infer it as a presupposition of Christian theology,” and Swinburne insists that, “the weight of Christian tradition [is] in its favour.” We can see now, however, that these points are of questionable use to the free will theodist, even if they can play an important role in a free will defense. This is because even if it is granted that there is as tight a relation between Christian theology and libertarianism as Hick and Swinburne suppose, libertarianism is not clearly made any more plausible by virtue of this relationship.<sup>11</sup> More work must be done here in virtue of the special demands of theodicy.

So *can* a forceful case be made for the claim that human beings (or at least most of them) enjoy libertarian free will? I am cautiously hopeful – but not as confident as Swinburne appears to be. After all, Swinburne is comfortable asserting that there simply are no good arguments against the libertarian thesis; I, however, am not. In fact, it often seems to me (and remember that I remain hopeful of vindicating the view) that the *prima facie* good arguments against libertarianism are legion. Part of the problem is that libertarianism is a complex thesis. First, it insists that incompatibilism is true (i.e., that the relevant kind of freedom is not compatible with determinism, whether naturalistic or theological). Second, it insists that neither naturalistic nor theological determinism obtains. This means that arguments against libertarianism can be aimed either at its incompatibilist claim or at its no-determinism claim. Contemporary critics of libertarianism have taken dead aim at both.

With respect to the incompatibilist aspect of libertarianism, for example, compatibilist critics have argued that the inference from determinism to the absence of free will is invalid.<sup>12</sup> And to the degree that compatibilist or revisionist conceptions of free will have been plausibly developed, the libertarian thesis is further challenged.<sup>13</sup> With respect to the no-determinism claim, the libertarian is forced thereby to face a family of “luck” arguments purporting to show that the falsity of determinism would obstruct rather than permit free will. That is, if indeterminism is true, then it seems that nothing explains why we do one thing rather than another at the point of decision. And if there is no explanation for the difference between an agent’s doing one thing rather than another, then it is tempting to conclude that the agent is not really in control of the action – it occurs, it seems, merely as a matter of luck.<sup>14</sup> Even Peter van Inwagen, who has done as much as any contemporary

11 It is worth wondering, too, if the relationship really is as tight as Hick and Swinburne suppose. Anecdotally, I have found it exceedingly difficult to find contemporary Christian theologians who take libertarianism very seriously. As a general rule, they seem more troubled by the possibility that a view of human freedom might upset traditional conceptions of divine foreknowledge or providence than that it might make the problem of evil intractable.

12 The defunct conditional analysis of freedom was once thought to reveal this invalidity. More recently, David Lewis (1981) argued ingeniously that Peter van Inwagen’s “consequence argument” for incompatibilism was formally invalid. Lewis’ contemporary followers in pursuing this strategy of attack include Kadri Vihvelin (2000) and Joseph Keim Campbell (2007) among many others. Harry Frankfurt’s (1969) counterexample strategy against the crucial “Principle of Alternate Possibilities” opened up an altogether new line of criticism against incompatibilist reasoning taken up most pointedly by John Martin Fischer (1994).

13 For forcefully developed compatibilist positions, see Wallace (1996), Fischer and Ravizza (1998), and Nelkin (2011). For revisionism, see Vargas (Forthcoming).

14 Alred Mele’s (2006) “contrast argument” seems to me to be the strongest version of this sort of argument. See Mele (2006) for details. The contours of my own reply to the luck objection generally and to Mele’s argument in particular can be seen in Speak (2012).

philosopher to buttress libertarian commitment, has conceded that a concern in the neighborhood of the luck argument justifies mysterianism about free will.<sup>15</sup>

As challenging as I have supposed the project is of vindicating libertarianism, I will add that the view has had a number of recent and able defenders, including Robert Kane (1996), Timothy O'Connor (2000), and E.J. Lowe (2008). And though I have expressed my hopefulness about the viability of this defense project, there is no space here to provide anything like my own substantive grounds for this hope.<sup>16</sup> It will have to suffice in this context simply to emphasize that the proponent of any free will theodicy takes on a substantial burden that is unlikely to be discharged either easily or quickly.

## The Challenges of Soul-Making

As before, I will set to one side various specific objections or concerns that might be addressed either to Hick or Swinburne respectively in order to focus attention on the burdens accepted by any approach to theodicy that appeals to soul-making. And, again, we can allow the value and impossibility propositions to provide the framing for these burdens.

With respect to the value proposition, it appears to be incumbent upon the proponent of a soul-making theodicy to make plausible the following claim: that the forms of moral maturity possible in our world make it better than any world with analogous virtues and less suffering. That is a tall order, in particular because smallish and local diminutions of suffering cannot very plausibly be thought to bring down the value of our character development in any significant way. We can put a sharper point on this problem by way of appeal to what Paul Draper has called a "Safe World." He asks us to consider:

. . . a world in which we can choose whether or not to make the effort to develop morally, spiritually, physically, and intellectually and to help others develop in these ways, but we cannot significantly harm ourselves or others, except by frustrating good desires (e.g., the desire that we improve ourselves). Suppose also that natural evil is either non-existent or, if it is logically impossible for human beings to exist without some natural evil, then natural evil is limited to the minimum amount required for human existence. . . . Notice that, except for the grief of unfulfilled good desires, the worst thing that can happen to us in a Safe World is to live a life of "cheap thrills." (Draper 2001, 467)

It seems that the defender of a soul-making theodicy will have to insist that our world is better than this Safe World. But on what basis? The simple insistence alone would not get us very far. I do not claim that soul-making theodacists will have nothing to say to this sort of challenge. I do think, however, that a broadly satisfying account of the superior value of this world over Safe World is likely to require a very deep and serious foray into moral philosophy (How should we conduct these cross-world value comparisons? What is the relationship between the value of a world and the value of the actions, events, and possibilities internal to it?). In addition, and in any case, the moral outlook required to accept the necessary account is likely to be so closely connected to theism as to raise important

15 His "roll-back" version of the luck argument and his appeal to mystery can be found in (van Inwagen 2000).

16 For intimations, see Speak (2004, 2012).

dialectical questions about the aims of theodicy and about who must be persuaded in order for it to succeed (questions that I will also raise very briefly in conclusion).

Return again to the impossibility proposition to see the other side of this coin. A soul-making theodicy succeeds only if it is able to make plausible the claim that not even God could bring about a world with possibilities for moral maturity as rich as we find in this world but without as much evil. The special challenge to consider here involves the limited resources available to a theodicy of this kind for explaining the full *scope* of the evil in the world: in a phrase, evil's magnitude, duration, and distribution.<sup>17</sup> Even if some suffering is needed for the project of shaping our characters, do we really need it in the full plenitude of kinds and amounts we find?

The challenge here has been raised in a number particular ways, some of which we have already had occasion to mention. Hick's recognition of supposedly dysteleological suffering, for example, demonstrates that the problem is serious enough for some to force recourse to mystery. And animal suffering is of special import since it is hard to see how the system of predation or, more generally, the sufferings contingent upon what Peter Geach (1977, 77) once referred to as "the elaborate interlocking teleologies of life" are required for moral development." One way to make this concern more precise comes from Nick Trakakis (2005), who argues that a theodicy of this kind cannot account for natural evil precisely because natural evil is not in fact necessary for a vale of soul-making. The strategy is to show that a world with benevolent and protective laws and no natural evils (i.e., no natural disasters, diseases, or animal predation) – an Eden world, as Trakakis calls it – could nevertheless have enough obstacles for the kind of moral resistance we need for maturation and development. This is because such a world could still have plenty of moral evils against which human beings would need to fight and in the face of which they would have to act either virtuously or viciously. In a slogan, then, the argument is that moral evil would be sufficient for soul-making. If this claim is plausible, it is hard to see how the impossibility proposition, in its full scope, is going to get sufficient support from a theodicy built principally on the value of soul-making, since soul-making considerations have typically been invoked precisely to accommodate natural evils.

Keep in mind that the goal of this section has not been to draw an essentially negative conclusion about the prospects for a soul-making theodicy. Rather, it has been to highlight the challenges that have faced approaches of this sort in the recent past and that are bound to confront the future efforts of those who would follow in the footsteps of Hick and Swinburne.

## Conclusion

It would go without saying, I trust, that nothing like a comprehensive assessment of either free will or soul-making theodicies has (or could have) been undertaken here. Still, we have been able to sketch the main contours of the two most important contemporary efforts at systematic theodicy, both of which appeal to the values of free will and soul-making. As is to be expected, I have left out a great deal of detail and, in fact, I have simply ignored many substantive objections that deserve attention. For example, I have said nothing (or very

17 This is terminology that we owe to van Inwagen (1988).

little) about the general anthropocentrism of these theodicies, or about the question of God's right to make our development the divine business, or about the essentially paternalistic image of our relationship to God presupposed by them (and implicit in my initial motivational appeals to your imaginary son), or about the plausibility of the deep axiology under-girding these approaches. All of this is to emphasize that there is, of course, much more to be said both for and against these strategies of theodicy.

I will conclude very briefly by parrying rather than directly answering what might be thought to be the central question raised by this chapter: namely, can a free will/soul-making theodicy succeed? The fact is that I think there can be no simple answer to this question – in large part because the general conditions of success for a theodicy are either unstable or opaque.

Whether a particular deployment of theodicy succeeds depends crucially on what it is supposed to do and by whom it is to be evaluated. Swinburne, for example, is admirably clear about these features of his own project. In defending the need for theodicy, he argues that it is incumbent upon most theists to offer one in order to justify (in an internalist sense) their respective theistic beliefs. What his theodicy must show, he claims, is how (and not merely *that*) it is probably the case that God is morally justified in permitting all the world's evils. In keeping with his focus on epistemic internalism, Swinburne is explicit that this demonstration must be made only to the subject's own satisfaction, by reference to her own standards of probability, and against the background of justified beliefs she already has.<sup>18</sup> This means that Swinburne's theodicy may succeed for some and not for others. In light of the fairly low and subjective bar he sets for justification, we should surely conclude that Swinburne's theodicy (or some variant) will, in fact, succeed for many theists.

But the aims and measures of theodicy proposed by Swinburne are not the only ones there are. Peter van Inwagen (2006, 47), for example, has insisted that a successful philosophical argument, in any domain, would have to convert a court of idealized neutral inquirers under appropriate dialectical circumstances to its conclusion. Applied to Swinburne's theodicy, this would mean that a court of such neutral inquirers would have to be persuaded by it that the considerations adduced are probably sufficient to justify God in permitting the world's evils. This is a much higher bar of success than Swinburne sets for himself. It would be hard to be especially optimistic about the prospects of success for any theodicy that accepts the van Inwagen conditions.<sup>19</sup>

Where does this leave us? Not, I hope, with simple cynicism about the project of theodicy or about the prospects, in particular, for a free will/soul-making version thereof. In addition to being in a better position to understand the structure and liabilities of the two most influential contemporary free will and soul-making theodicies, perhaps we are also now in a better position to evaluate future theodicies in the light of their respective and particular aims.

18 I extract these conditions for success from Swinburne (1998), discussion on pages 14–16.

19 van Inwagen himself thinks that no argument for any substantive philosophical position can be a success on these conditions.



## Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Justin McBrayer, John Parrish, and two anonymous readers for very helpful feedback on this chapter.

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# The Connection-Building Theodicy

ROBIN COLLINS

## Introduction

In this chapter, I will propose a new theodicy, which I call the *connection-building theodicy* (CBT), but which others have encouraged me to call the *love theodicy*. As with most theodicies, the CBT assumes the so-called greater good principle, which roughly says that God would only allow an evil (or type of evil) if God's allowing it is necessary for a greater good, or the prevention of a greater evil.<sup>1</sup>

I do not claim the greater goods cited by the CBT provide the sole reason that God allows evil; in fact, in some cases, they might not even provide the primary reason, but only compensatory goods that help morally justify God's allowing it. Consequently, the CBT should be seen as adding to other theodicies by articulating a potential greater good that has been neglected. Nonetheless, throughout this chapter, I will generally avoid appealing to other theodicies and instead attempt to demonstrate the extent to which the CBT is able to function as a stand-alone theodicy. Finally, although the CBT does not presuppose any particular religious tradition, I will often show how it fits with orthodox Christianity and the New Testament, and also use the latter to illustrate, elaborate, and develop some aspects of it.

The chapter is organized as follows. I first explicate the basic claims of the CBT. Then I answer a variety of objections that could be raised against it. Finally, I explicate what is perhaps its greatest strength: its potential explanatory, practical, spiritual, and theological fruitfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> Since under open theism, God cannot predict all the consequences of allowing an evil to occur, an open theist would need to appropriately qualify the above statement to take this into account – for example, as a first approximation, by substituting “likely to be necessary for a greater good . . .” for “necessary for a greater good . . .” in the earlier statement of the principle. Although I am sympathetic to open theism, for the sake of simplicity of exposition, I will neglect these qualifications throughout.

## The CBT Explained

The basic idea of the CBT can be understood as consisting of two major postulates:

- (1) Virtuous responses to evil create intrinsically valuable connections among persons, with the type of connection corresponding to the type of virtuous act.
- (2) Some of these connections will last forever as an *ongoing* part of the conscious experience of both the performers and recipients of the virtuous acts.

Using these two postulates, I will argue that it is plausible to hold that the value of such connections outweigh both the finite evils of this life along with any negative connections formed by unvirtuous actions.

At its most fundamental level, a connection is a special sort of relation between persons (or even persons and nonhuman creation) resulting from significant past interaction between them, particularly interactions involving morally significant actions. The basis for hypothesizing such connections is that people commonly claim to feel deeply connected to other human beings, such as their parents, their spouses, or someone who has greatly helped them in times of suffering and hardship. For example, people who have risked their lives for each other (such as in war) often feel such a connection and attach great value to it. Such connections are often expressed by saying that the other person is “like family” or is like a “part” of one’s self.

For the purposes of the CBT, the relevant connections formed by virtuous actions come in at least three closely interrelated forms: that of *appreciation*, *contribution*, and *intimacy* (for lack of a better word). Since often a virtuous action will create all three forms of connections, I will label the set of these connections as those of *appreciation, contribution, and intimacy* (ACI).

The connection of appreciation occurs when one has appreciation and gratitude for another person because of what the person has done. In this life, this connection of appreciation is never complete since we cannot be fully aware of another’s contribution to our lives. As I will argue later, it is reasonable to assume that in the next life we will gain a complete, or at least nearly complete, awareness of these contributions. Thus, for instance, if Sue “self-sacrificially” helps Rebecca in her time of need, the eventual awareness of this could enable Rebecca to have an ongoing appreciation of Sue’s act of self-sacrifice.

The connection of contribution occurs whenever a person significantly contributes to the welfare of others. Many people have a great desire to contribute positively to the world and only feel satisfied with their lives if they have made significant contributions; they gain great satisfaction from having contributed, even to the extent of thinking that their life was worthwhile even if they endured more suffering than happiness. Often this sense of value goes beyond the value of the contribution itself, but crucially involves a perceived value of *having been the means* by which the contribution occurred; thus, for instance, if God directly provided for the welfare of others, this value would be lost. The CBT claims that this value does not merely end with the actual act of contribution, but continues as an ongoing reality into the future – assuming that we will eventually become fully aware of our contributions to others, as this theodicy hypothesizes. Since contributing to the welfare of another often produces a sense of an intimate interconnection between contributor and recipient (e.g., each becomes a “part” of the other’s life), I call this aspect of the overall connection “a connection of intimacy.”

The connections of ACI of particular importance for the CBT are those formed by virtuously responding to evil, which I call *evil-transformative* connections. They fall into three major types, corresponding to the types of virtuous response that created them. Further, the existence of each type clearly requires that God allows the corresponding types of evil. These types are:

- (1) Connections of ACI resulting from *one person sacrificially aiding another in times of suffering*, especially when that aid involves some sort of sharing in the pain and suffering of the recipient.
- (2) Connections of ACI resulting from one person helping another out of *moral and spiritual darkness*.
- (3) Connections of ACI resulting from *forgiving* and *being forgiven*.

In sum, the greater goods envisioned by this theodicy are those eternal, positive ongoing evil-transformative connections of ACI formed between two or more personal beings based on one of them significantly contributing to the other's well-being in the above three ways.

### *The eternal value of connections*

A crucial assumption underlying the CBT is that these connections can exist as an *ongoing* reality in a one's life, not simply a past fact about oneself. Consider, for instance, a case in which Rebecca's friend Sue helps her through a time of great suffering. The connection between Sue and Rebecca does not merely consist of the fact that Sue helped Rebecca during that time; this fact would exist even if both of them permanently lost all awareness of this fact. Rather, although Sue's past virtuous acts form the basis of the connection, its continued existence requires an ongoing conscious awareness of the acts, even if that awareness is only dimly in the background of their consciousness. Given that each moment of an ongoing, conscious awareness and appreciation of these acts has intrinsic value, the total value of the connection can plausibly be thought to continue to grow, eventually outweighing the evils to which the virtuous acts were a response. Even if the continued existence and growth in value of these connections is not inevitable, it seems plausible to hypothesize that it is within God's power to arrange our after-death psychology and environment so that this would occur without counterbalancing negative consequences.

The following crude model illustrates the plausibility of thinking that the good of these connections could eventually outweigh the evils. Suppose our future life can be divided into small successive units of time,  $\Delta t$ . Now suppose that for each  $\Delta t$ , the conscious experience of some particular positive connection has an intrinsic value of  $\Delta G$ . Assuming that these successive intrinsic goods can be summed, the sum will continue to grow as long as the connection remains part of one's ongoing experience. In contrast, even though the mere fact of Sue's virtuous act will last forever (since it will always be a fact that she helped Rebecca), there is no reason to believe its value increases with time. The reason is that the growth in value requires the continuing instantiation of some states of affairs with intrinsic value, such as the ongoing appreciation of Sue's virtuous act.

As an analogy to this continual growth in value, suppose you had a minor toothache, but to get rid of the toothache you had to undergo an extremely painful operation. If you were told that the toothache would only last a week, or even a year, you would probably not undergo the operation. But, if you found out it would last for all eternity, you would

probably undergo it. (I certainly would!) The difference in these two cases is that the disvalue of an ongoing toothache increases with time, eventually outweighing the disvalue of the painful operation to remove it, even if the toothache is only mild.

At this point, one might worry about the analogue of the economic law of diminishing returns: for each successive  $\Delta t$  for which the connection exists, the additional goodness it contributes might be less than in the previous  $\Delta t$  in such a way that in the limit of infinite time, the sum converges to a finite value. (Think of how the geometric series  $1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 + \dots$  converges to 1.) In response, I stress that even when considered as a stand-alone theodicy, I am offering the CBT only as a *plausible* theodicy. Thus, I need to claim only that it is plausible to think that even if the good of the connections sum to a finite value in infinite time, that finite value is larger than the total disvalue of the evils God must allow in order for the connections to exist. And certainly this is plausible. For example, suppose one took the standard ordering of the real numbers as one's natural variable. If, for some fixed  $\Delta x$ , one were to assign a probability distribution for the sum converging to a value in some interval,  $\langle y, y + \Delta x \rangle$ , the least arbitrary probability distribution would be an equal probability distribution over this interval. Since the sum could converge to any value between zero and infinity, under this distribution, for any finite value,  $Z_E$ , of total evil in the world, the probability is zero of the total good converging to some number less than  $Z_E$ .<sup>2</sup>

### *Several clarifications*

Before moving on, several clarifications should be made. First, the CBT recognizes that some connections might have no value, or even negative, intrinsic value. It is only the positive connections that directly result in a greater good. (The problem posed by negative connections will be addressed later.)

Second, the CBT does not claim that deep positive connections of ACI could not exist without evil. All it claims is that certain types of virtuous connections – specifically, the three types of evil transformative connections listed above – could not exist without evil. For example, if Alice bakes a cake for Jane, Jane can have an ongoing appreciation of Alice for her generosity even though no one suffered or sinned.

Third, the postulated connections of ACI need not be restricted to those between humans; for example, they could occur between humans and God, between humans and angels who come to their aid, between humans and the rest of creation, between angels, and between angels and God. Within Christian theology, the connections of ACI between God and humans might be the result of God's sharing in our sufferings, redeeming us, and giving us power through the atonement to love and contribute to others. For those who consider the book of Daniel as being in some way inspired, the angel who fights against the "Prince of Persia" for 21 days in order to come to Daniel's aid (Daniel 10:13, 20–21) illustrates this human–angel connection, along with other cases in which angels are involved as intermediaries (Acts 12:6–7). On the other hand, a potential human–creation connection

2 Such a distribution would violate countable additivity; I do not think this is a problem for infinite ranges, as I argue elsewhere (Collins 2009a, 249–251). In any case, I am not saying that the equiprobability distribution is the right one; it is presented only to provide a reason why one might think it is plausible that the sum converges to a number greater than  $Z_E$ .

is indicated by passages such as Romans 8: 18–21, which suggests that it is through human beings that all of creation will be redeemed. (For a development of this idea, see Collins 2009b.)

Finally, the ability to respond virtuously to another's suffering should not be restricted to normal physical and psychological channels. Indeed, the CBT makes it likely that we will be able to affect each other through other highly personal channels, such as prayer, since this would increase the number of potential positive connections between personal agents. (See Collins 2011.)

I will now consider some potential objections to the CBT.

### *Problem of negative connections*

Often pain and suffering result in the formation of negative connections, such as bitterness and hate. Several responses can be offered to the problem this presents for the CBT. First, negative connections could be considered an unavoidable byproduct of people being highly vulnerable to moral evil and living in moral and spiritual darkness, both features that also allow for certain types of evil-transformative connections mentioned above.

Second, and most importantly, *these negative connections can be redeemed through the victim forgiving the victimizer*. Forgiveness creates a new positive connection of forgiveness, such as the person forgiven greatly appreciating being released from the negative connections and guilt that they bear as the result of their moral wrongdoing; even the person doing the forgiving will greatly benefit through the act of forgiving. Further, the deeper the hurt, the harder forgiveness is, and hence the deeper the appreciation is likely to be. Unlike any other action, forgiveness can redeem bad connections by, metaphorically speaking, "encapsulating" them in positive connections.

For Christians, this offers a reason why Jesus put such stress on forgiving one's enemies. Further, within standard Christian theology, such ongoing positive connections for being forgiven are not restricted to those between victims and perpetrators, but also would occur between the perpetrators and Christ because of Christ's forgiveness of them through his act of atonement on the cross. Whether these positive connections of forgiveness occur in all cases depends on one's view of the afterlife, which I will discuss next.

### *Hell objection*

The Christian doctrine of everlasting punishment greatly amplifies the problem of evil since even in its mildest forms (such as annihilationism) it implies that some people's lives will be forever unredeemed. Hence it poses an enormous problem for any theodicy. One solution is to adopt some form of universal salvation, such as some form of universalism which affirms the existence of hell but claims that eventually those in hell will be brought to repentance. Since there is already a growing body of literature debating the merits of universalism, I will not discuss the strengths and weaknesses of universalism here.<sup>3</sup>

Assuming for the sake of argument that there is an eternal hell, one might think that the CBT magnifies the problem posed by an eternal hell by adding eternally existing nega-

3 For a good overview of arguments for and against universalism, see Parry and Partridge (2004). Many good articles addressing this issue are available on the internet, such as that of philosopher Keith DeRose (2011).

tive connections to the other evils of hell. In response, first note that if there is an eternal hell, there need not be any ongoing consciously experienced connection between those in hell and those in a heavenly state. However, the CBT implies that those in the heavenly state have a memory of this life, which raises the problem of knowing that a loved one is in hell. I find William Lane Craig's (1991, 306–308) suggestion that those in a heavenly state would not be consciously aware of loved ones in hell highly implausible. Since the memory of a loved one (such as a daughter) is inseparable from other memories of one's earthly life, under Craig's suggestion, one's memory of earthly life would either be effectively made inaccessible, or it would become like Swiss cheese, full of gaping holes. Even if one merely knew of the possibility of an earthly life, that could easily lead to wanting to know if one had such a life and what it was like; God's refusing to answer such a request would itself raise suspicions. On the other hand, if God eliminated all such knowledge, that would also eliminate the knowledge that one was redeemed through Christ's atonement, or even the atonement itself. I doubt many Christians would want to hold this. The general problem of the knowledge that a loved one is in hell taking away from one's heavenly bliss, therefore, is a problem for any theodicy (or defense). Hence, it is not a reason to reject the CBT, but rather to reject the idea of an eternal hell or annihilation.

### *Alternative routes objection and opportunity cost objection*

Another potential objection to the CBT is what could be called the *alternative routes objection*. This is a common objection to theodicies in which the objector envisions alternative ways in which God could have created and interacted with the world that would have resulted in commensurate goods but significantly less evil.

To address this objection, the first thing to note is that unlike many theodicies the CBT does not hypothesize a singular greater good (such as a freely formed virtuous character in the case of the soul-making theodicy), but rather a family of goods. For example, each of the three major types of evil-transformative connections – for example, that involved in helping someone out of moral and spiritual darkness – is its own irreplaceable type of good. Thus, for instance, a world in which no one suffered from spiritual and moral darkness would be one that lacked the corresponding type of evil-transformative connection, even if it contained other types of valuable connections. One might conclude, therefore, that God is justified in creating a world with the different kinds of evil we find because only then could all three types of evil-transformative connections exist.

This response, however, encounters a significant problem, what I will call the *opportunity cost objection*: the evil-transformative connections are often obtained at the *cost* of other positive connections being formed that do not require suffering or moral evil. For example, although having a child that is seriously ill during her entire childhood allows for connections of shared suffering and special care, it eliminates connections with the child formed on earth that are based on shared health and wholeness, such as enjoying a beautiful hike in the mountains. Or, to use a variation of an example presented by Stanley Kane (1975, 2–3) against the soul-making theodicy, if one's spouse becomes seriously ill, and even dies, the possibilities of the kind of connections of helping one's spouse finish a dissertation or win a gold medal are lost.

To respond to this objection, it will be helpful to add two subsidiary theses to the two core theses of the CBT introduced previously:



- (i) *Effort-Sacrifice Thesis*: Everything else being equal, ongoing connections formed by virtuous responses that require more sacrifice or effort have greater intrinsic value (per unit of time) than those that do not.
- (ii) *Variety Thesis*: (a) Everything else being equal, the value of a set of positive connections increases with the variety of connections in the set. (b) In general, the broader the type that a particular new connection adds to the mix, the more variety it adds.

Being with and caring for someone during times of great suffering – such as a long, chronic illness – often involve special sacrifices and great depths of persistent, patient love. Consequently, thesis (i) implies that the amount of appreciation, contribution, and intimacy is potentially deeper and greater than could occur in the lost positive non-evil-transformative connections. Thus, plausibly, the value of some evil-transformative connections outweighs any likely set of positive connections that are thereby excluded.

Moreover, in the heavenly state, humans will have plenty of opportunity to form connections based on shared joy or helping others achieve difficult goals, opportunities that an all good God would arrange assuming such connections are goods (and there are no other counterbalancing considerations). So, God's allowing evil and suffering need not cause us to lose out on forming a great number of these other types of connections, but in some cases only might postpone their formation to the next life. In contrast, if God did not create a world in which there was pain, suffering, and moral evil, personal agents would never have the opportunity to form evil-transformative connections, and thus the great good of these sorts of connections would be lacking forever.

Of course, one will always miss out on certain narrow types of positive connections that are excluded by God's allowing the evils in question, such as that formed by enjoying a beautiful hike in the mountains with one's child, as in the example earlier. However, many, if not all, of the significant, more general types of connection will not be missing, at least those that do not involve evil; for, even if they are not formed in one's earthly life, they can be formed in the afterlife – for example, as mentioned above, in the afterlife one could form connections based on shared joy or achievement. In contrast, evil transformative connections can only be formed in a world with evil.

This response, however, assumes that the added value of new narrower types of positive connections decreases as the types gets narrower, as implied by thesis (ii) above. If, for instance, the heavenly state allows for an enormous variety of connections of ACI based on shared joy, then everything else being equal, the added value of forming a particular connection of shared joy in this life might not be as great as the added value of the alternative evil-transformative connection. The same could also be said about certain types of evil-transformative connections, thus giving God a good reason to limit the quantity of those types of evil.

I do not claim that we know that thesis (ii) is true, but I take it as plausible. For instance, we think there is something missing in a life that merely involves a repetition of the same activity over and over again, or is merely focused on a relationship with one person. In general, we take variety – as long as it contributes to a sufficiently unified whole – to contribute to the richness of a person's life, and hence be of intrinsic value.

Finally, even if a person does not experience a particular type of connection or has not had the opportunity to form many connections at all, it is reasonable to postulate that one could vicariously participate in the connections that others have formed; this perhaps provides an additional reason for thinking that having a variety of general types of connections is of value. For Christians, this idea could be articulated in terms of the idea of

the mystical body of Christ (which I take to include all those who will eventually be in union with God, not just those who are Christians in this life). The idea is that in the heavenly state, we progressively come to vicariously share in other's connections of ACI (perhaps even those involving nonhuman personal agents), just as many of us can vicariously participate in the joy of others – for example, many people feel a special joy in hearing about two people who over many years have developed a strong, loving marriage. As stated by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); also see 2 Corinthians 1:7 and Romans 12:15.) Perhaps, for instance, we could vicariously participate in the tremendous connection of appreciation for being forgiven that exists between John Newton (the famous slave trader who wrote the song *Amazing Grace*) and Christ. If God did not permit evil, evil-transformative connections would not exist, and hence no one could participate in them, not even vicariously.

### *Lack of awareness objection*

Another potential objection to the CBT is that often people are not aware of the contribution of others to their lives. One response is to claim that eventually all those in a heavenly state will become fully aware of this. Given that there is an afterlife, this seems highly plausible. First, we have good reasons for eliminating the extreme of having no knowledge of this life, since in that case it would be hard to see what the point of this life would be. Further, the claim of Christians, Jews, and Muslims that there is divine judgment – whether restorative or retributive – gives us good reason to believe there is some sort of memory of this life since it surely serves justice and the purposes of such judgment better for the one judged to remember the act one is being judged for than not to. But, once any memory of this life is allowed, unless God arbitrarily limits one's knowledge or ability to gain information about this life, one could always find out more. Even answers to simple questions about one's life (such the name of the doctor who helped one in the emergency room) end up leading to further questions (what other good deeds did the doctor do), and so forth.

Second, Christians have significant scriptural support in favor of this claim. For example, in Mark 4:22, Jesus says that “there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light” (NRSV), with Jesus being recorded as making similar statements in Matthew 10:26 and Luke 12:3; similarly, the Apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 4:5 that we should not pronounce judgment before its time because God will “bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart” (NRSV). Although I would not go as far as claiming these statements imply that we will be completely aware of all the contributions others have made to our lives, they do strongly suggest that our awareness of them will be enormously expanded, which is all that is needed for the CBT.

Finally, in this regard, some Christians might object that the value of the evil-transformative connections would become insignificant since they would pale in comparison with the glory of being with Christ. This objection, however, runs contrary to Paul's claim in 2 Corinthians 4:17 – namely, that the afflictions of this age can generate an eternal weight of glory: “For momentary, light affliction is *producing for us* an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (New American Standard). (This idea of afflictions producing glory is in virtually all translations of 2 Corinthians 4:17.) Further, even if they did pale into insignificance, so would the evils of this world; hence they could still outweigh the latter, which is all the greater good principle requires.

### *Extreme evils and the victimage objection*

Probably the most common objection raised against virtually all theodicies is that they cannot explain extreme cases of evil. The CBT, I believe, can provide a partial explanation. I will consider two examples, the Holocaust and a more concrete example in which a young girl is captured as a sex slave and then daily raped and demeaned until she eventually dies – with no one ever trying to rescue her.

To address why God allows these type of evil, note that the more God intervenes *apart from persistent human requests*, the less dependent our welfare becomes on the actions of others; in general, this would decrease the potential there is for deep, evil-transformative connections, and hence one would expect such intervention to be relatively rare. If, for instance, God prevented the Holocaust, that would have eliminated a wide range of evil-transformative connections. First, the Holocaust allowed for particularly great degrees of forgiveness: the greater the evil that someone commits against another, the greater the amount of forgiveness that is possible, if not in this life,

Second, it led to an enormous number of people who worked at all levels – politically, through writing, and the like – to try to prevent it from happening again. Those alive since the Holocaust owe these people a debt of gratitude and *appreciation* for their work in making our world a better place, even though in this life we might not be aware of what they did. When all is brought to light, connections of ACI between them and us will be something in which we all can participate and treasure. Of course, if God had not allowed evils such as the Holocaust, humans could have still worked for a better world. Arguably, however, the connections of ACI would not have been as great, for it is plausible to think that the greater the evils that the efforts of others save us from, the greater the connections of contribution, appreciation, and perhaps even intimacy.

In the example of the little girl earlier, by hypothesis, there are not any positive connections of ACI between the girl and others humans while in this life. In the next life, however, there is the possibility of a connection of forgiveness between her and her captors. Further, for theists who believe that God redemptively shares in our suffering (such as many Christians), there is another great positive connection, both in this case and more generally (such as the Holocaust): that of Christ redemptively sharing in our suffering.

Plausibly, the worst kind of suffering is that in which one feels completely abandoned and one's personhood negated. To find out that God shared in one's suffering would not only greatly affirm one's personhood, but plausibly establish a great intimacy between one and God – as it often does if another human shares in one's suffering, but to a far greater extent. This would only occur, however, if God's sharing in the victim's suffering was for her good (not, e.g., so God could experience what it is like to suffer). And it is fairly easy to see how it might be for her good: as we know from human cases, it often is of great healing value to have another empathetically understand and feel what one has experienced, and for communal beings such as human beings, perhaps necessary for a full healing from being severely abused. In fact, it is likely that only after such a healing (with its concurrent affirmation of one's personhood) that it is possible for one fully to forgive one's abusers.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This idea of Christ sharing in our suffering, and its ability to help with the problem of evil, has been pursued in much depth by Marilyn Adams (2006) (e.g., pp. 29–79).

It is also reasonable to suppose that through those who deeply suffer, the rest of us can vicariously appreciate the depth, and multiple facets, of the suffering love and consolation of God in a much greater way than would otherwise be possible. This not only increases the connection of appreciation between us and God, but also creates a great connection of appreciation between us and them since it is through them we come to this experiential understanding of the love and consolation of God. This in turn allows them to greatly contribute to us, resulting in a further connection of contribution between them and us and a further valuing of their worth. By providing us with this experiential taste of multiple facets of the suffering love of God, in some sense they become the most honored members of the body of Christ. This is in accord with the Apostle Paul's claim that the weakest members of the body of Christ are the most honored (1 Corinthians 12:23).

The afterlife could also be arranged so that it is necessary for other persons besides God empathetically to share in one's suffering (at a deep level) in order for full healing to occur; in fact, given the communal nature of human beings, one might think this is a necessity. This would in turn create further connections of appreciation between those who suffered and those who helped heal them. The above possibilities also allow for greater goods to come out of ordinary (nonextreme) evils that no one in this life helped us with: to help with a complete healing from them, God, and perhaps others, would also need to share in them, and thus these sufferings would also result in positive connections.

It is important to mention two final issues. First, the CBT need not hold that the above positive connections are the primary reasons God allows the evils in question; rather, they could be compensating greater goods. For example, God might allow these evils to preserve a high level of human responsibility for each other's welfare (which is the precondition of evil-transformative connections); nonetheless, it could be the case that without the good of the positive connections cited above, this would be an insufficient reason for God's allowing the evils. Second, as Eleonore Stump (2010, 191) has suggested, it seems be contrary to perfect goodness to allow one person to suffer in order for others to benefit from some greater good without that suffering being a necessary means to some greater good that benefits the victim. Most of the positive connections cited above, however, are of benefit to the victim, and thus they fulfill this criterion.

### *Undercuts moral action objection*

A general concern with many theodicies is that they undercut moral action, since arguably, for many theodicies, preventing suffering prevents the greater goods they postulate. One response is to claim that human moral action should not depend on such a cost-benefit analysis. In the case of the CBT, one could also respond that preventing suffering allows for other positive connections to be realized, such as those based on helping others. Further, since the CBT can be fruitfully combined with other theodicies (see concluding section), it can invoke other goods that would be realized by preventing suffering – such as soul-building. For example, even though harming someone allows for a connection of forgiveness that can defeat the evil and its consequent negative connection, there still is the loss of a potential connection of helping the other person along with a consequent harm to one's soul (the reverse of soul-making). So, plausibly, in general even more good is realized by acting virtuously to begin with.

## Fruitfulness and Implications

For those imbued with the spirit of scientific enquiry, an important but often underemphasized consideration in evaluating a theodicy is its potential fruitfulness, such as its ability to provide a positive framework for theological reflection and practical living. (From this perspective, a theodicy's ability to deal with the so-called pastoral problem of evil should be included as one of the criteria for judging its adequacy.) In this section, I will articulate some of the ways in which the CBT is potentially fruitful, which I believe shows its value as a good working, if not a true, hypothesis. I make no claim, however, that other theodicies are not as fruitful in some of the respects discussed below.

### *Love, relationships, and interdependence*

The CBT supports the ethics of love of neighbor, along with ethical action in general, by giving loving acts an ongoing and eternal depth and value. Among other things, this helps resolve a conflict many feel between the apparent cruelty of the world, which seems indifferent to humans and other sentient beings, and the moral imperative to value and love others. The CBT sees this apparent indifference itself as giving humans the space and opportunity to virtuously respond to other's needs, and thus develop eternal, positive connections. Consequently, the apparent indifference and unloving character of the world becomes a necessary condition for the realization of certain forms of love.

The value of love is also something most people intuitively recognize, with people often saying that the most valuable aspects of their lives are the loving relations they have with others. Further, most people have an intuitive sense that somehow the value of acts of love transcends the intrinsic value of the acts themselves by continuing on in some ongoing form of connection between the individuals involved. Suppose, for example, that a person lived in a state of near starvation for five years to help someone hide from the Nazis. Further, suppose that both parties – due to some form of amnesia – completely lost the memory of the sacrifice that was made, and remained forever unaware of what transpired. In that case, it seems clear that some great good would have been lost as compared with the case where the memory of the sacrifice remained fully intact. Examples like this imply that there is some good that both transcends the acts of love and requires that the acts be remembered.

Love, understood as going beyond benevolence to interconnection, can be seen as the centerpiece of the CBT; the kind of connections it hypothesizes shows why every loving act is of such great, ongoing value. This, of course, fits extremely well with the Christian scriptures, which stress love as the supreme, overarching virtue, and with other religions that recognize the importance of love. Indeed, the value that the CBT gives to these interconnections coincides with the centrality of the metaphor of the body of Christ in New Testament and Christian thought. This metaphor suggests that love among personal beings is fully realized only within a network of connections of mutual interdependence as occurs between the cells in an organism. The CBT therefore, can be seen as being based on the supreme goods stressed in the New Testament – that of love, interconnection, and interdependence. It goes beyond the New Testament, however, in making explicit how these are of eternal value and how they can provide an answer to the problem of evil.

The CBT also makes sense of why interdependence is built into the fabric of human life, all the way from the extreme dependence of children on their parents to the depend-

ence we all have on the contributions of previous generations. This latter dependence results in an extensive array of connections that keep expanding outward as people build off the labor of previous generations. For example, many scientific pursuits, such as discovery of the polio vaccine, can be seen as resulting in an expanding array of positive connections: all those who have benefited from the vaccine are positively connected to all those involved in discovering the vaccine, including the supporters of the research. In the afterlife, many of these connections will become an ongoing part of our conscious experience. Similarly, there will be great connections of ACI between those living today and those in the past who have pushed for basic moral reforms (such as the abolition of slavery), or have worked to uncover and develop spiritual insights. Indeed, with perhaps some qualifications, every good deed one does creates an expanding array of positive connections into the future, even if the persons benefiting from the good deeds are not yet aware of them.

Finally, the CBT's stress on the value of human interdependence, and more generally interdependence among personal agents, leads one to expect that typically God would work through intermediaries, since this maximizes connections. Indeed, this is just what one finds in the Christian scriptures – for example, God's working through angels (such as in Acts 12:6–7), or using human agents to spread the Christian message.

### *Hiddenness of god/spiritual darkness*

The CBT offers resources for addressing the existence of moral and spiritual darkness, with the hiddenness of God being a special case of this. Although we could contribute to each other's spiritual and moral growth if there were no spiritual or moral darkness, God's allowing the sort of darkness we find in the world allows us to contribute in deeper ways. The connections of ACI would not be as great, for example, if humans only could help each other move from a morally neutral condition to a morally positive position. As is, humans can both help each other out from significant moral and spiritual darkness and prevent each other from sinking into such darkness. Although deeper darkness leads to greater evil, we do not know what the optimal balance is between it the greater positive connections it allows, or even if there is an optimum; hence, we do not know if the world would have been better if God allowed less moral and spiritual darkness.

Further, one must look at the issue historically. If from the beginning, humans had a high level of spiritual and moral enlightenment that was not subject to significant corruption, then there would have been far less opportunity for individuals to work for substantial spiritual/moral enlightenment and reform. As is, a vast number of individuals throughout history have fought and risked their lives and well-being for this. Those of us in the Western world, for instance, are beneficiaries of the social reformers who fought to overcome such evils as slavery, racial and gender discrimination, and the kind of institutionalized brutality exemplified by the Roman Empire (such as the gladiators or the long, agonizing crucifixion of prisoners of war). In the afterlife, this will result in the full flowering of a vast array of connections of ACI that would not have been possible if humans had always had a relatively high degree of moral and spiritual enlightenment. As stated, this claim assumes a morally and spiritually progressive view of human history, which I believe is amply justified when one considers the level of brutality taken as acceptable in the past. Even without a progressive view of history, however, one could still appreciate moral and spiritual reformers and activists for “holding back the tide of evil.”



For Christians, these ideas can help explain why God requires the ongoing, persistent effort of human beings to transmit the revelation in the New Testament (instead of, for instance, having supernaturally empowered the early disciples to reach all parts of the world), and why God did not make the teachings of scripture clearer. Instead, God has left it up to the persistent, ongoing efforts of humans to understand and apply the revelation in scripture, something that allows for connections of appreciation between those who through persistent effort have gained spiritual understanding, developed better translations of scripture, and so on, and those who are the beneficiaries of these efforts.

### *Religious diversity*

The CBT provides a framework for understanding why religious diversity exists, and how properly to engage it. Under the CBT, this diversity can be seen as providing great opportunities for humans to help each other gain fuller intellectual and existential understandings of important truths about reality. Although such opportunities would be available in world in which God guaranteed that everyone had the right overall worldview, arguably the extent and depth of the interconnections would not be as great. It requires considerable effort, and interdependent cooperation, to reach out across cultural and religious divides, overcome one's prejudices to understand the point of view of others, and then attempt to integrate what one has learned into a coherent framework. Because virtuous acts that are difficult or costly engender more appreciation than those that are not, and because those that involve the cooperation of many people allow many more connections to occur, God's allowing religious diversity has the potential of greatly increasing the quantity and depth of connections of ACI that involve helping others in their spiritual and moral development.

The earlier line of reasoning, however, need not imply that all major religions are equally true. For example, all the basic Christian claims – such as the Resurrection, Incarnation, and Trinity – could be true, and yet other religions could help Christians understand their own faith better, help them see additional truths about reality, and perhaps modify some of their beliefs to take into account the insights they have to offer. This understanding of religious diversity, therefore, should not be taken to endorse the kind of pluralism that says all major religions are equally true.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have proposed what I have called the CBT as providing additional resources for addressing the problem of evil. After carefully elaborating the core of the theodicy and answering objections to it, I discussed its potential explanatory, theological, and practical fruitfulness. I stress, however, that the CBT should not be seen as competing with other theodicies, but as providing additional resources for addressing the problem of evil, and often productively extending or complementing them. For example, it extends the virtuous response and related theodicies (such as that offered by Richard Swinburne 1998) by postulating an intrinsically valuable, ongoing consequence of virtuous responses that continually increases in value. And, given that one's self is in part constituted by one's connections with others, the CBT complements and extends the soul-making theodicy by considering a major part of forming one's soul as that of forming positive connections of



ACI with others. This has the positive benefit of resolving the perceived conflict between self-interest and other-directed interest, since the two now coincide. Finally, although it is not obvious that the CBT requires that humans have libertarian free will, it is plausible to think that, everything else being equal, connections formed by libertarian free acts are more valuable than those formed by nonlibertarian free acts; thus, the intuitions behind the free will theodicy can play an important role in the CBT.

## Acknowledgments

Many people have helped me develop this theodicy. I would especially like to thank my wife, Rebecca Adams, Susan Schmidt, and my colleague David Schenk for their encouragement, and the members of the philosophy departments at Western Washington University and Purdue University for comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, and Landon McBrayer who served as an outside referee.

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# Best Possible World Theodicy

HUD HUDSON

## Three Puzzles and Their Independence

The overworked descriptions “the problem of evil” and “the problem of the best” have been employed so frequently and in such a diverse range of discussions that their invocation runs serious risk of equivocation. I shall avoid those phrases and concentrate instead on three puzzles for the theist prompted by reflections on evil, each presented as an inconsistent triad:

### A First Inconsistent Triad

- (1) If God exists, there are morally justifying reasons for the evil of the world.
- (2) There are no morally justifying reasons for the evil of the world.
- (3) God exists.

### A Second Inconsistent Triad

- (4) If God exists, the actual world is the best possible world.
- (5) The actual world is not the best possible world.
- (6) God exists.

### A Third Inconsistent Triad

- (7) If God exists, there is no infinite hierarchy of ever better worlds.
- (8) There is an infinite hierarchy of ever better worlds.
- (9) God exists.

Some inconsistent triads – those in which the inconsistency is logical – consist of three propositions from whose conjunction we may derive a contradiction. Each of our inconsistent triads has this feature, and thus each presents us with the challenge of identifying

and exposing one or more falsehoods amongst its trio of claims, for (given their joint entailment) we have guarantee that at least one of the three is false.

Since our three inconsistent triads share their third proposition – namely, that God exists – the atheist has an immediate solution to all the puzzles. Moreover, a straightforward argument against the existence of God can be constructed either on the foundation of a defense of (1) and (2) together, or of (4) and (5) together, or of (7) and (8) together, and (of course) this fact has hardly been overlooked in the literature for atheism (see Chapter 2).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the puzzles are independent from one another and that the atheist may adopt the logically-possible package of accepting any one of the associated arguments for atheism while rejecting the other two. (By “logically possible,” I here simply mean that if this combination of views fails to be genuinely possible, logic alone will not reveal this fact; rather, a demonstration of its impossibility would require appeal to substantive philosophical theses.) For example, one might think that although there is a best world, God would not be not required to maximize value, and yet that some evils are unjustified – thus inclining toward the first atheistic argument while rejecting the second and third. Or one might think that God would be required to maximize, that all evils are justified, that there is a best world, and yet that ours just is not it – thus inclining toward the second atheistic argument while rejecting the first and the third. Or one might think that all evils are justified, that there is no best world, but instead that there is an infinite hierarchy of ever better worlds – thus inclining toward the third atheistic argument while rejecting the first and the second.

Accordingly, the theist must battle on three fronts, and victory in just one battle will lose the war. In other words, the theist must successfully reject at least one of (1) and (2), at least one of (4) and (5), and at least one of (7) and (8). In this essay, I will acknowledge some familiar motivation for accepting those six theses, motivation that should (at least initially) trouble the theist. I will then explore the prospects of one strategy (and its variations) for confronting this trio of challenges, a strategy which exploits a Multiverse Hypothesis.

## Motivating the Puzzles for Theists

Again, the atheist’s response to our inconsistent triads is to deny the third proposition in each. The theist qua theist cannot follow suit. Yet each of the other claims has some initial and substantial pull on the traditional theist. This places her in an uncomfortable position, and to appreciate the extent of this discomfort, it is worth briefly rehearsing why.

If God exists, then God is essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, and essentially perfectly good. Some rough and ready (and admittedly controversial) explanations: By “God is omnipotent,” I shall here mean that God has it among His genuine alternatives to act in any way that is (metaphysically) possible for Him to act. By “God is omniscient,” I shall here mean that at any time, God knows each proposition that is true at that time. By “God is perfectly good,” I shall here mean that God never does anything morally impermissible, God is never morally blameworthy, God has all of the virtues that it is (metaphysically) possible for God to have (or if they are incompatible, God has one of the unsurpassable subsets of virtues), and God is motivated (but not automatically obligated) to create and sustain good states of affairs and to prevent and eradicate bad states of affairs.

Against that backdrop, consider some initial remarks in favor of (1), (2), (4), (5), (7), and (8) – nothing comprehensive, just enough to put those theses squarely on the table.

Just to be clear, I do not speak in my own voice in the next several paragraphs, but rather in the guise of a proponent of the propositions in question in order to give them a more forceful introduction.

Initial remarks in favor of proposition (1):

(1) If God exists, there are morally justifying reasons for the evil of the world.

If God exists, God would know (or foreknow) where evil exists (or is about to exist without divine intervention) [by omniscience], God would be sufficiently motivated to eradicate (or prevent) that evil unless there were morally justifying reasons to permit it [by perfect goodness], and God would be able to do what God knows how and is sufficiently motivated to do [by omnipotence]; that is, barring morally justifying reasons, pointless and gratuitous evil would not exist for long (or would not exist at all). However, since history tells us an exceedingly long, violent, and blood-chilling story that knows no shortage of evil, if God exists, there are morally justifying reasons for the evil of the world, after all.

Initial remarks in favor of proposition (2):

(2) There are no morally justifying reasons for the evils of the world.

The assortment of theodicies on offer is dazzling and their authors are ingenious, but at bottom, theodicies are bankrupt – as was famously remarked by A.E. Housman, “*malt* does more than Milton can to justify God’s ways to man.” Even an attempt as well championed as the Free Will Defense has apparently insurmountable obstacles at every turn, and like all theodicies, it either fails to be compelling or fails to be comprehensive (see Chapter 14). For example, the admittedly genuine goods secured by a community of free beings are far too modest and too meager to compensate for the millennia of horrific suffering among the innocent at the hands of moral agents. Compatibilists deny that permitting such evil is necessary for freedom in any event (see Chapter 28). And in the absence of wholly implausible, speculative claims about the bad behavior of extraterrestrials or demons, the Free Will Defense could hardly be extended to account for the world’s natural evils.

Moreover, our collective failure at theodicy is not for lack of trying. We have looked long and hard and competently for genuine candidates and have simply come up empty (see Chapter 12). Unfortunately, our history of careful, and systematic theorizing should (perhaps unhappily) teach us at least one lesson, namely, that if there were morally justifying reasons for the evils of the world, we would be aware of them and would recognize them as morally justifying reasons. Honesty compels us to admit that we are not aware of any, and such admission combined with our conditional lesson compels us to declare that there simply are not any morally justifying reasons for the evils of the world (see Chapter 4).

Initial remarks in favor of proposition (4):

(4) If God exists, the actual world is the best possible world.

If God exists, God would know which item in the plurality of possible worlds outranked all others in value (by omniscience), God would be sufficiently motivated to actualize that best of all possible worlds unless there were nonconsequentialist morally justifying reasons to create less than the best (by perfect goodness), and God would be able to do what God

knows how and is sufficiently motivated to do (by omnipotence); that is, barring such morally justifying reasons, God's knowledge, character, and power would ensure that the way things actually are surpasses all alternatives. Accordingly, since there are no such morally justifying reasons to create less than the best, if God exists, the actual world is the best possible world. (Since the terrain covered by (4) is considerably less familiar than that covered by (1), the interested reader might wish to consult Quinn 1982, Rowe 1993; 2004, and Thomas 1996 for further support and Adams 1972 for further opposition.)

Initial remarks in favor of proposition (5):

(5) The actual world is not the best possible world.

Look about with any seriousness and all Panglossian optimism quickly disappears. Perhaps you can talk yourself into a frame of mind where even the most revolting of history's moral horrors has some hidden but compensating good and where ages upon ages of animal pain and suffering are properly permitted in accordance with some unknown morally justifying reason or other. But no one should take seriously the suggestion that things could not have been in any measure better – that the omission of this or that bit of suffering would somehow have robbed the world its title of being best or that the addition of this or that moment of joy would not have increased its value at all. And such omissions or additions are surely to be found among the possible alternatives. (As before, since the issue at stake in (5) is not as widely discussed as that in (2), the interested reader might wish to examine Penelhum 1967 for further support and Pike 1963 for further opposition.)

Initial remarks in favor of proposition (7):

(7) If God exists, there is no infinite hierarchy of ever better worlds.

If there were an infinite hierarchy of ever better worlds, every possible product of divine creation could be surpassed in value. But if every possible product of divine creation could be surpassed in value, God would not be essentially perfectly good. But essential perfect goodness is a nonnegotiable feature of the conception of God. Accordingly, if there were such a hierarchy, the essential attribute in question would be impossible to satisfy, thus securing God's nonexistence.

(8) There is an infinite hierarchy of ever better worlds.

It is easy to sympathize with the intriguing and widely popular intuition that there is always room for improvement even when things are already uniformly and perhaps even infinitely good – just by adding more goods without introducing more evils such that the previous goods comprise a mere proper subset of the latter goods. But let us postpone detailed considerations in favor of this proposal now, for we will be better positioned to appreciate them after covering a bit of ground below. (For further thoughts on this topic, see Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, Grover 2003, Wielenberg 2004, and Kraay 2010.)

Of course, each of the brief defenses above can be (and has been) challenged in any number of philosophically sophisticated ways. Against (1) – not everyone agrees each evil (or even the whole world-package of evils) stands in need of a morally justifying reason to permit its occurrence; perhaps some gratuitous evil is consistent with God's existence, after all (see van Inwagen 2006 and Chapter 27 of this volume). Against (2) – and as attested

to by the present literature in philosophy of religion, theodicies continue to be introduced and refined and defended. Moreover, ever growing numbers of skeptical theists are unimpressed by the consequences of our failure to discover and expose morally justifying reasons to permit evil (see Bergmann 2009 and Chapter 29 of this volume). Against (4) – apologists argue that an unsurpassable being can create a surpassable world (see Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994). Against (5) – some optimists continue to maintain that (despite considerable appearance to the contrary), a respectable case can be made for the thesis that our world ranks best, after all (see Hudson 2008). Against (7) – the attribute may well be nonnegotiable, but plausible refinements on the analysis of “perfect goodness” can effectively block the alleged entailment from perfectly good creator to unsurpassable creation. And against (8) – we might agree that there is always room for improvement – but only size, shape, and aesthetics permitting (but more on this thought below).

## **The Hypothesis of a Best Possible World: The Letter and the Spirit**

Let me begin in the middle of things with some remarks on our Second Inconsistent Triad. Talk of God’s actualizing a best possible world presupposes a number of potentially troublesome assumptions, a few of which deserve consideration and comment. First, there is the widely adopted view that God alone does not determine which world is actual but that the community of free creatures shares in the responsibility of actualizing one of a number of worlds consistent with certain parameters that have been fixed by God’s creative activity. Second, we may wonder whether possible worlds are the sorts of things that can be bearers of value and whether, if so, the values of different possible worlds are always commensurable (see Mann 1990). Third, we can put pressure on the assumption that there are no ties for “first place” among the possibilia, that no plurality of worlds can be both alike in value and greater than all others – that is, that there is no best world, but only some unsurpassable ones. In a similar vein, recall that the title of “best” will be unawardable, if it should it turn out there is an infinite hierarchy of worlds where every world is bested by some other (for further reflection on these last two difficulties, see Plantinga 1974, Quinn 1982, Kretzmann 1990, and Swinburne 2004).

These presuppositions do seem to lurk behind discussions of God’s actualizing a best possible world, but the spirit of that proposal provides ways to accommodate some of the worries just noted without simply relinquishing the general strategy at issue. For instance, we could classify those aspects of the world whose presence seems due to the creative activity of God alone (whether or not some creatures participate in creating other features) and interpret propositions (4) and (5) in an associated (restricted) sense without blunting much of the force of the reasoning designed to support them. Similarly, without giving much ground, we can qualify (4) and (5) by replacing “the best possible world” with “among the unsurpassable worlds” and thereby face a refined inconsistent triad just as challenging as its predecessor.

The remaining worry, however, is too difficult to dismiss quickly. Defending the thesis that worlds are universally commensurable is not a trivial task (see O’Connor 2008). Unfortunately, any further exploration of this final assumption is beyond the scope of this essay, and I will here simply adopt the assumption of commensurability without argument, but only after a nod of acknowledgment to its centrality and to its capacity to considerably complicate the disputes and discussion to follow.

Quite obviously, demonstrating the hypothesis that there is in fact a best possible world would have a significant role in all three of our puzzles by combating propositions (2), (5), and (8) in turn. For if the hypothesis is true, then not only does (8) fall immediately, but the door is open to showing (against (5)) that our world is that world, and to showing (against (2)) that this designation goes a long way toward furnishing the morally justifying reason God needs for creating our world.

Still, an open door is one thing, walking through it another. Is it not painfully obvious that ours fails to be the best? What could possibly justify Panglossian optimism here?

Significantly, those are two very different questions; the first rhetorically suggests we are already in possession of good reasons for thinking our world is not the best, while the second hints that we are without any good reasons for thinking our world is the best. Moreover, these questions mirror two strategies – the first of which consists in affirming proposition (5) outright and thereby blocking the support a denial of (5) would have provided for a denial of (2), while the second adopts the more modest aim of suspending judgment on (5) and consequently on (2), as well.

Nice distinctions aside, however, many regard the unsurpassability of our world as absurd, and are happy to embrace proposition (5) without much apology. Here is a hypothesis about why: When we focus upon some known and horrid feature of our history, invoke our favorite argument from evil with that horror as the centerpiece, and then argue for atheism, we are quickly drawn into a battle about whether there is some (known or unknown) morally justifying reason for permitting that particular evil. But win or lose that battle, it just seems obvious to many that (all on its own) the presence of that horrific evil disqualifies our world from being *best*, and it is that special honor, after all, which is contested in the present discussion. We will return below to other reasons to maintain that our world is not the best, but I suspect that the identification of *disqualifying horrors* is the most popular such reason. Still, perhaps it is worth considering a brief story that suggests this reasoning might be a bit hasty (from Hudson 2008):

Suppose you have two very large baskets of apples. In the first basket, the apples are undiseased and blemish-free but are also tiny, unripened, pitiful examples of what apples can be; free of certain defects they also lack many of the features required for the finest apples. In the second basket, all of the apples are well-shaped, mature, and perfectly-ripened. Selecting an apple from the second basket you discover that it has a bruise on one side. You may still think that each apple in the second basket (including the one in your hand) is superior to any apple in the first basket on the grounds that although at least some are thus bruised here and there, the virtues they share (even when combined with such defects) always outweigh the quality of even the best of the tiny and unripened lot. Should you also form the additional view that the apple in your hand is not the best of the apples in the second basket? That depends on your information about the other apples in the second basket. I have assumed that you know that the apples in the second basket share certain good-making features, but are you in a position to determine whether or not each such apple has a bad-making feature equivalent to or worse than the bruise on the apple in your hand? That's a reasonable question to answer before proceeding. Now suppose you have two very large classes of worlds. In the first class, the worlds are free from horrors like Rowe's dying fawn, Ivan Karamazov's Turkish soldiers, and the holocaust, but lacking certain features (say, creatures with free will) are impoverished examples of what worlds can be; free of certain defects they also lack many of the features required for the finest worlds. In the second class, all of the worlds share the good-making features lacked by those in the first class (say, the goods of free creatures in society with one another or an absence



of massive irregularity in their laws). You find yourself inhabiting a world from the second class and discover that it is marred by a horrific evil. You may still think that each world in the second class (including your own) is superior to any world in the first class on the grounds that although at least some contain such horrific evils, the virtues that they share (even when combined with such defects) always outweigh the quality of even the best of the impoverished lot. But given your knowledge of that particular horrific evil, should you also form the additional view that your own world is not the best of the worlds in the second class? That depends on your information about the other worlds in the second class. I have assumed that you know that the worlds in the second class share certain good making features, but are you in a position to determine whether or not each such world has a bad-making feature equivalent to or worse than the horrific evil found in your own world? As before, that's a reasonable question to answer before proceeding. This answer, though, may be harder to come by than is the answer about the apples in the second basket which can be had just for the looking.

The ever-increasing skeptical theism literature is ripe with such maneuvers, stressing skeptical premises, such as "for all we know, any world at least as good as ours contains some evil or other equivalent to or worse than that in ours" (see Chapter 29). It is an underappreciated feature of this literature that not only does it plausibly block inferences from inscrutable horrors to gratuitous and unjustified horrors, this sort of defense may be pressed into service again to block inferences from inscrutable horrors to disqualifying horrors for our world's being best. Still, such a modest defense does not itself give positive grounds for Panglossian optimism, and thus a retreat from affirming (5) to suspending judgment about that proposition does not provide a *solution* to our Second Inconsistent Triad, an achievement that would require rejecting, rather than suspending judgment, on (5).

What would seem to be needed, then, is some way to move beyond the bare hypothesis that there is a best world (or some unsurpassable ones) to a new and appealing line of reasoning that suggests our own world may be the favored candidate for that office – a line of reasoning that is not as vulnerable to the withering criticism that has so often reduced its predecessors to little more than targets for satire.

Fortunately, there have been some recent and intriguing attempts in just this direction, and surprisingly, whereas they can be seen to furnish a direct argument against proposition (5), they also provide an independent and important way to engage (2) that does not (as before) depend on the success of pairing the case against (5) with the consequentialist assumption that it is always permissible to create the best.

## The Multiverse

Recent literature in philosophy and physics has revived serious interest in the notion of a *multiverse* – by which I mean any universe that is somehow or other sectioned into numerous divergent regions that vary independently with respect to their cosmic conditions (i.e., with respect to facts about the number and nature and distribution of their fundamental entities and facts about the number and nature and relative strengths of their fundamental forces). Moreover, it so happens that many competing theories that share these salient features while differing from one another in other significant respects are live options in contemporary theorizing about the nature of the world.

Alternative portraits of a multiverse include (i) the countless Lewis worlds (i.e., spatio-temporally and causally isolated universes whose existence may be supported by considera-

tions of theoretical unity and economy); (ii) the plentiful domains of inflationary cosmology; (iii) the abundant universes born of quantum vacuum fluctuations; (iv) the ancient idea of an eternal return in an oscillating big bang/big crunch universe; (v) the modern M-theory speculation of a cyclical big splat/big bounce sequence for pairs of three-branes floating in a multidimensional space; (vi) the branching cosmos posited by many worlds interpretations of quantum theory; and (vii) the infinite resources of a plenitudinous hyperspace or a plenitudinous hypertime (see Unger 1984, Leslie 1989, Hudson 2006; 2010, and Greene 2011).

In addition to the truly astounding variety of applications to outstanding problems in philosophy and physics, the exploration of the notion of a multiverse may also yield intriguing insights into our present discussion. Several authors have recently argued that the hypothesis of one or another multiverse either significantly mitigates or even wholly resolves one or more of our inconsistent triads in a theistically friendly manner (see McHarry 1978, Forrest 1981, Turner 2003, Hudson 2006, Almeida 2008, O'Connor 2008, and Megill 2011). Critics, of course, vigorously contest these claims (see Rea 2008, Monton 2010, and Kraay 2011; 2012). The remaining sections of this chapter will be devoted to an examination of the promising prospects for engaging our inconsistent triads by appeal to a multiverse.

## **The Multiverse and the Second and Third Inconsistent Triads<sup>1</sup>**

So how does the hypothesis of a multiverse help to provide a satisfactory resolution to our Second Inconsistent Triad? Well, it strengthens the case for our world's being the best (or among the unsurpassable) both defensively and offensively.

When not in the grip of a maximizing conception of divine creativity, it is commonplace to think that there are several possible worlds worth creating, each world above a threshold of some kind or other, each a world God would have been justified in creating were He to have made it actual. The threshold details are, of course, hotly disputed. Certainly nothing as crude as "more value than disvalue" will do, nothing as exclusive as "no disvalue of any kind" will do, and owing to plausible distribution-of-good considerations, not even the deliberately vague and consequentialist "valuable enough" will do. Accordingly, in addition to having a certain balance of value over disvalue, perhaps the world's inhabitants may also have to enjoy (qua individuals) a certain kind of value over disvalue in the lives accorded to them (or else individually receive adequate compensation for their own sufferings afterwards), or perhaps they may have to consent in some manner to their condition, or be shielded from certain kinds of injustice, or be permitted opportunities to display autonomy, or have occasion to enter into special relations with others.

However the threshold details get resolved, let us begin by considering the standard alternatives to what we take to be our own world (premultiverse theorizing). In other words, begin by thinking about nonmultiverse worlds, but just those worlds that happen to be above the relevant threshold – that is, all and only such worlds that would have been acceptable stand-alone creations (excluding, e.g., worlds with gratuitous evils and worlds

<sup>1</sup> In composing this section, I have borrowed from Hudson (2006, chapter 7) and 2008. The interested reader can consult those pieces to engage this topic in more depth.

without adequate compensations to individuals). The problem before us quite naturally arises from thinking that (i) God had to choose from among these very alternatives, (ii) the ranking of that choice is evident to us (its inhabitants), and (iii) it is inescapably obvious that things could have been so much better than *this*. Once the multiverse hypothesis is introduced, however, (i), (ii), and (iii) require reevaluation. Given an appropriately diverse multiverse, each such alternative in our original class of candidates can be housed (so to speak) in one of the separate partitions of an appropriately-structured multiverse, and thus in a real sense, God need not choose between such goods but can have them all. Moreover, our little window on the world (as inhabitants of the local partition) does not reveal enough of creation to leave us confident that its ranking is any longer accessible (much less evident) to us. Finally, we are not asked to relinquish the claim (whose obviousness has always been the finest defense against Panglossian optimism) that things could have been so much better than *this* – it is just that the “this” now picks out only a sliver of the whole and thereby does not have the undercutting force it previously possessed. To be fair, there is still enough in the range of “this” to nominate certain events for the office of disqualifying horror, but recall the scope of skeptical theism and the baskets-of-apples story.

Does not the multiverse in question clearly stand out as the best of the worlds under consideration thus far? It is guaranteed to contain every good tendered by any one of its adversaries in the original candidate class and (by hypothesis) everything else it layers on is worth having, too. Before accepting this verdict, however, it is worth exploring the suggestion in more detail.

What of the objection that this does not really get to the heart of the original problem? That is, the real perplexity is that given alternatives better than what we actually have, why would not God bring about a rather different sort of partitioned reality instead? In other words, if multiverses are on offer, why should we not expect a multiverse each partition of which is as good as a partition could be – maxed out in value – rather than a multiverse that here and there contains above-the-threshold-but-unnecessarily-rough neighborhoods like ours?

I think the best answer for a proponent of the present strategy is simply that even though each independent partition of the proposed possible alternative would be at least as good as or better than each of the independent partitions of the actual world, the world itself would be inferior. That is to say, whereas the local comparisons would favor the proposed possible alternative, the global comparison would favor the diverse multiverse. Scores of contributions to aesthetics and value theory have trumpeted the tremendous goods that can be contributed by such diversity, and far from being an ad hoc reply, it seems rather to be of a piece with reasoned verdicts of comparative value in many analogous settings. On this view, the multiverse is governed by a generous plenitude principle or perhaps even provides a version of the great chain of being in which a token of every sufficiently worthy configuration consistent with God’s nature is realized in some concrete way in some partition or other.

Another worry (from Rea 2008): If dimensioning-up was such a splendid idea, why stop at a multiverse, each of whose partitions is (as we have just been conveniently imagining) a four-dimensional alternative to what we thought (premultiverse) was our own isolated four-dimensional world? If the-more-the-merrier is really the slogan of the day, why not a world of five or six dimensions – a multiverse itself partitioned into multiverses?

Well – *why not?* It is easy, at first blush, to sense a *reductio* strategy here. But anyone who has been attracted by this line of reasoning thus far need not retreat just yet. Consider an intriguing passage from the precritical Kant:

If it is possible that there are extensions with other dimensions, it is also very probable that God has somewhere brought them into being; for His worlds have all the magnitude and manifoldness of which they are capable. (Kant 1747)

This Kantian reflection betrays some sympathy with the point at issue, for although Kant is speaking of higher dimensional spaces, his thought shares the salient feature of a multiverse-of-multiverses scenario. Yet his brief but straightforward explanation seems to take the sting out of the would-be reductio. Attention to the dialectical situation is crucial at this juncture. The problem of the best arises only when the theist recognizes a tension between two things she is encouraged to take seriously – namely, ultra-strict limitations on worldmaking (given a maximizing conception of God’s creative activity) and just how awful things seem to be wherever she happens to look. But this dialectical pressure to countenance a necessary connection between God’s character and the unsurpassability of God’s creation should (*if it has any force at all*) lead her happily to accept the invitation to climb on up the ladder of  $n$ -spaces or multiverse-hierarchies. For example, *if* God really must create the best and *if* a 32-space with multiple time dimensions really is metaphysically possible, then why oh why let all that good space go to waste? Fill ‘er up! In short, there is something about the presuppositions of the original challenge that does not sit at all well with this manner of dismissing the present proposal for responding to it.

A final worry: What of duplicate universes? Aside from the highly questionable Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles (unsuccessfully employed in McHarry 1978 and Turner 2003), what bars God from creating several duplicates of each partition that is worth creating at all? The possibility of duplicate universes has been raised in support of proposition (8), the ever better infinite hierarchy of worlds thesis (Monton 2010). The idea is that even something as grand as a multiverse of multiverses could be improved upon by the additional creation of duplicates of its many partitions, and that there is no upper limit on such improvement, for any cardinality of duplicates can be exceeded.

While not being unassailable, the pressure to increase both the dimensionality and the duplication of partitions as mechanisms for adding value to the multiverse strikes me as a credible reason to take the hierarchy version of the no best world thesis seriously. Perhaps, then, it is wise to take cases:

*Case 1:* There is a best possible world (or some unsurpassable ones) and for the reasons noted above, it is (or they are) versions of a multiverse. Of course, questions would remain, for if so, then either there is a metaphysical ceiling limiting the number of dimensions and duplications, or else, for *some* reason, after a certain point, such additions do not increase the value of the world to which they are appended. Why not? Some guesses: Perhaps additional value is exhausted once there are proper-class many duplicates (as discussed in Monton 2010). Perhaps value is captured in types, and once a type is tokened a master artisan moves on (as suggested in O’Connor 2008). Perhaps value is wedded to the minimization of arbitrariness and some numbers of duplicates are more arbitrary than others; for example, one seems better than 17, continuum-many better than 19 billion billion, and so on (see Lewis 1986). In Case 1, then, the judgment comes down against proposition (5) once again, and there is some residual puzzlement about why there are not more dimensions or more duplicate partitions than there actually are.

*Case 2:* There is no best possible world (and no unsurpassable ones). In this case, the theist signs off on proposition (5) and resolves our Second Inconsistent Triad by rejecting

proposition (4). The cost of this resolution, however, is that she must now squarely face the problem of no best world. In particular, she now needs to identify and defend a satisfactory reason for rejecting proposition (7) in order to explain why there being no best world is not bad news for the theist who acknowledges God's essential perfect goodness.

Let us return, however, to the question that opened this section – How does the hypothesis of a multiverse help to provide a satisfactory resolution to our Second Inconsistent Triad? Well, it makes a defensive contribution by finding a way to acknowledge and respect the popular judgment that things could have been better than *this*, while reducing the force of that observation to local rather than global commentary. The blunting of that judgment together with the baskets-of-apples story (designed to prevent promotion of any known local horror to the status of a disqualifying horror) aims at undermining our claim to know that our world is not best. Moreover, it makes an offensive contribution by furnishing positive reasons to think that the multiverse provides a stage on which God can create everything worth having simply by partitioning goods, rather than being forced to sacrifice one good to obtain another. These defensive and offensive contributions together generate a case for rejecting proposition (5) and thus for resolving the inconsistent triad.

## The Multiverse and the First Inconsistent Triad

So how does the hypothesis of a multiverse help to provide a satisfactory resolution to our First Inconsistent Triad?

*The quick way:* If one judges as successful the multiverse-resolution of the Second Inconsistent Triad by way of refuting proposition (5), then that victory can be carried over to an immediate strategy for objecting to proposition (2) in the First Inconsistent Triad. If our world is the best possible world, then (unless there are overriding nonconsequentialist considerations at stake) securing that status is itself the morally justifying reason for God to permit the evil of the world. As noted earlier, however, the multiverse hypothesis provides resources for engaging (2) that are wholly indifferent to the vexed question of whether or not a multiverse is best or unsurpassable.

Some recent work in this area has been promising but underdeveloped (in McHarry 1978, Turner 2003, and Megill 2011), and initially it might seem difficult to see how the multiverse could be invoked to argue not just for ways things could have been better, but as a source of new morally justifying reasons for inscrutable horrors. Nevertheless, that is exactly what the multiverse has the potential to do. Whether or not a particular horror has an extrinsic feature, such as a compensating good or morally justifying reason, depends crucially on the kind of environment in which it is embedded, and the multiverse enhances that environment considerably. Even if a particular evil would have been gratuitous if the local environment in which it appeared were the whole of the universe, it may yet be compensated for once located in a mere portion of that whole. For instance, recall the proposed threshold-consideration that the very same individuals who suffer are the individuals who must be compensated for that suffering. If one or another multiverse scenario opens the door to such compensation (as does, say, the plenitudinous hypertime scenario), the options for morally justifying reasons will have been significantly enriched.

There is thus an additional consideration here that cautions us about the lessons to be learned from the baskets-of-apples story above. A choice of fruit, if restricted to a single

apple, should certainly come from the second basket, for despite the bruises each such apple is superior to every undeveloped apple in the first basket. But if a choice of fruit can be an entire fruit basket, it will probably be time to add some apples from the first basket to the second, on the grounds that they can improve the whole. That is to say, whereas if God's choice of creation were limited to a single nonmultiverse, only the first class of worlds we originally considered – those that passed the threshold standards on their own merits – would be genuine candidates. But if creation choices extend to multiverses, then some partitions that would not have made it as solo projects (because, say, some evil would then have gone unjustified) are eligible for reconsideration and inclusion on the grounds that they have some other good making feature – for example, a sort of aesthetic value that arises only in conditions inhospitable to life (a feature not worth making actual at the expense of sentience, but one decidedly worth having for free).

Moreover, it is much easier to see how a multiverse hypothesis has the potential to play a further role in a defense against proposition (2). Recall the second initial remark in favor of proposition (2) from our discussion earlier: “Our collective failure at theodicy is not for lack of trying. We have looked long and hard and competently for genuine candidates and have simply come up empty. Unfortunately, our history of careful and systematic theorizing should (perhaps unhappily) teach us at least one lesson, namely, that if there were morally justifying reasons for the evils of the world, we would be aware of them and would recognize them as morally justifying reasons. Honesty compels us to admit that we are not aware of any, and such admission combined with our conditional lesson compels us to declare that there simply are not any morally justifying reasons for the evils of the world.”

This remark endorses a “noseeum inference” (i.e., if we don't see ‘em, they ain't there), a representative example of which reads as follows:

(LE): If there were a morally justifying reason for permitting the deadly and devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755, we would be aware of it and we would recognize it as a morally justifying reason. Sometimes, we unhesitatingly accept conditionals that display this pattern (as in this case):

- (1) If there were a severe pain in my head, I would be aware of it and I would recognize it as a severe pain in my head.

And sometimes, we are on-balance persuaded by these conditionals (as in this case):

- (2) If there were a huge tiger stalking about this room, we would be aware of it and we would recognize it as a huge tiger stalking about this room.

And sometimes, we are not especially inclined to endorse these conditionals (as in this case):

- (3) If there were a dietary reason for the presence of these twenty-six coils in the recovered alien spacecraft, then we would be aware of it and we would recognize it as a dietary reason.

And sometimes we unhesitatingly reject these conditionals (as in this case):

- (4) If there were an object too complex for us to be aware of, then we would be aware of it and we would recognize it as an object too complex for us to be aware of.



What shall we make of (LE)? Into which category does it fall and why? I, for one, do not find it especially persuasive. The brief remarks in favor of (LE) earlier suggest that our grounds for endorsing this noseum inference come from a long, hard, careful, systematic investigation that came up empty. Of course, no one pretends to have examined all the candidates for morally justifying reasons, for such candidates are states of affairs and their infinite number quickly outruns our collective investigative capacities. Rather, the idea is that we have a justifyingly strong, inductive generalization, allegedly supported by a large and representative sample of the whole. And again, should (LE) manage to be secured in this fashion, the defense of proposition (2) in the First Inconsistent Triad will be impressively compelling.

Why, though, are we supposed to concede that the sample in question is representative? If we have good reason to believe that the sample is unrepresentative, this strategy for defending the conditional would not get off the ground, and there are seriously promising reasons of that sort to consider. But there is no need to aim high and defend such reasons; even if we ratchet down and maintain only that we have no good reason to believe that the sample is representative or that we are in the dark or in doubt about whether the sample is representative, the inductive argument is still in jeopardy. So-called skeptical theists are in the business of denying premises like (LE) in just this manner. In general, they argue either that we have no good reason to believe (or else that we are in the dark about whether) the goods we are aware of are representative of the goods that there are (Wykstra 1984, Alston 1991, Howard-Snyder 1996, Bergmann 2009, and McBrayer 2010). And our situation gets even worse.

In these discussions, it is common to simply spot ourselves a remarkable ability, namely, that we can recognize a morally justifying reason when we see it. After some reflection, however, it seems obvious that we should drop this conceit, for it seems little more than sheer bluster. We have no good reason to believe (or else we are in the dark about whether) the entailment relations we know of between goods and permitted evils are representative of the entailments relations there are. Consequently, we may well have already discovered an exceedingly valuable good that would justify God in permitting this or that horrific evil and then (after failing to recognize its necessary connection to the evil in question) mistakenly rejected its candidacy on the grounds that it does not require permission of the evil.

And our situation gets even worse, yet again, for we have no good reason to believe (or else we are in the dark about whether) the degree of value we recognize in those goods we are aware of is representative of the total degree of value those goods actually manifest. Consequently, we may well have already discovered a good that would justify God in permitting this or that horrific evil and also have already discovered its necessary connection to the evil in question and then (after failing to recognize its full range of goodness) mistakenly rejected its candidacy on the grounds that it was not sufficiently compensatory.

Thus, argue our skeptical theists, we have no good reason to think that if there were such a compensating good or some other morally justifying reason for the world's horrific evils, we would be aware of it, or – if it were somehow an object of mere awareness – that we would be able to recognize its full degree of value or its function as a compensating good or morally justifying reason.

So, to return to the primary theme of this chapter, whether or not those observations convince you to relinquish support for proposition (2) in the First Inconsistent Triad by way of appeal to (LE), it would seem that seriously countenancing a multiverse hypothesis should *decrease* one's confidence in the support (LE) lends to (2). The suggestions that we



have good reason to believe that the goods we are aware of are representative of the goods that there are or that we have good reason to believe that the entailment relations we know of between goods and permitted evils are representative of the entailment relations that there are strike me as wishful thinking at best. And once the multiverse hypothesis is on the scene, we have even less reason to think our knowledge of goods and entailment relations is representative, since the salient features of the other partitions are inaccessible to various kinds of inquiry and inspection by those of us confined to this one. Whereas we are not simply entitled to populate the hypothesized partitions with all the exotic goods we like, we should at least recognize that the range of candidates for morally justifying reasons may be both far too large and far too opaque to acknowledge adequate support for proposition (2) in the First Inconsistent Triad by way of an inductive-generalization defense of (LE).

## Acknowledgments

For criticisms and comments on earlier drafts of this chapter, I thank Elizabeth Barnes, Mike Bergmann, Ross Cameron, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Bradley Monton, Sam Newlands, Tim O'Connor, Mike Rea, Jason Turner, Robbie Williams, the philosophy departments at the University of Leeds and the University of Notre Dame, and the organizers and audience at the 2012 Lisbon Conference on Leibniz's *Theodicy*.

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# Providence and Theodicy

THOMAS P. FLINT

## Introduction

Evil and its implications for theistic belief have long been subjects of philosophical and theological discussion. There is, to be sure, no such thing as *the* problem of evil. Various arguments, citing differing examples or types or quantities of evil, and affirming varying logical relations between the evil cited and the existence or nature of God, have long been in play. But whatever the specific argument, some theists have been inclined to respond by offering a *theodicy*, a justification of God and of God's world in the face of the evil cited by the objector. In promoting their case, though, many (if not most) such theists have implicitly relied on a general picture of how God is related to and rules over his world. That is to say, they have presupposed some notion of *divine providence*. The relationship between different types of providential pictures and theodicies will be the focus of this chapter.

One constant difficulty in discussing the issue of theodicy is that of terminology. What exactly *is* a theodicy? No single account has been universally employed. For example, Plantinga has suggested that a *theodicy* purports to offer God's *actual* reasons for permitting evil, while a *defense* offers merely *possible* reasons (Plantinga 1974, 192). But (to give but one of many examples) Hasker has used the term *theodicy* in a different sense:

A theodicy replies to such an argument [from evil] by giving a justifying reason for the existence of the evil in question; a reason such that, if it indeed obtains, the permission of the evil by God is morally justifiable and does not constitute a reason to disbelieve in God's existence or his goodness. It is unnecessary, and often unwise, for the theodicy to claim that the reason given is the actual reason God has permitted the evil; this may or may not be the case. (Hasker 2011a, 281–282)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Hasker also uses the term “defense,” but gives the term a meaning different from Plantinga's; see his footnote 9 on 285.

Clearly, one who is offering a theodicy in Hasker's sense may be offering merely a defense in Plantinga's sense. Nothing of substance, it seems to me, hangs on how we use the words. Still, to avoid confusion, and because his usage is (I think) at least closer to being standard in such discussions, I will employ the terms as Plantinga does. And though our focus will be primarily on theodicy, discussion of defenses will inevitably also elbow their way in.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of providence at issue is (comparatively) clear. Christians (like their Jewish and Muslim brethren) traditionally do not think of God as a distant deistic demiurge, but as a creator intimately involved in and concerned about his world. That world, they insist, is the result of his creative activity, and continues to develop according to his plan. His omnipotence is manifested in the control he maintains over his creation; his omniscience is shown in the wisdom and wonder the world reveals; and his perfect goodness and love are disclosed by the constant care he exhibits for all that he has made.

Such a notion of providence would, I think, be widely endorsed by most Christians. But my statement of the view has been formulated intentionally at a very general level. As soon as we try to fill out the view more completely – as soon as we try to offer a finer-grained *theory* of providence – differences emerge. What kind of plan does God have for the world? Is it specific or general? Is it complete, or does it cover only certain events (or certain types of events)? Is God's plan eternal and unchanging, or does he modify it as events on earth transpire? Is his plan assured of success, or does he undertake a degree of risk in pursuing it? What types of knowledge does he have available to him as he tries to guide what happens in his world? How vigorous is that guidance? Is his willing that something happen sufficient (logically or causally) for that thing to happen? Or does his providence operate at least in part through free beings whose actions are in no sense determined by him? And what exactly does his goodness suggest regarding our ultimate place in his plan?

These and similar questions have led Christians who agree that God is provident to develop that shared conviction in significantly different ways. Though the variety of views here is impressive, I think it is helpful to see them as falling into three categories, what I will call *Thomist*, *Molinist*, and *Open* theories of providence. In the next section, I will try briefly to outline the differences between these three theories. This will prepare us to address the central question of this chapter: What implications does the acceptance of one of the three major theories of providence have on the type of theodicy, or on the type of defense, one is able to offer?

### Three Theories of Providence

Categorizing philosophical or theological positions is always a dangerous and potentially misleading business. To be helpful, the number of categories needs to be small enough to illuminate central similarities among proposals; to be fair, the number needs to be large enough not to obscure crucial differences. Hitting the right number and types of pigeon-holes is no chore for the faint of heart. Still, the value of categorizing positions, in terms of bringing order to what may at first appear a bewildering and chaotic mass of possibilities, can hardly be gainsaid.

2 The issue of what constitutes a theodicy is discussed at length in Hasker (2011b). See especially Hasker (2011b, 432–435) for his references in this regard to van Inwagen (1991) and Stump (2010).

This general truth is, I think, especially *apropos* when one is discussing theories of providence. Thus, with all due trepidation, and with full awareness of the simplifications involved in the process, I propose that our thoughts about providence and theodicy can aptly be guided by our dividing notions of providence into three main theories.<sup>3</sup>

The three theories are best seen as reactions to two separate questions. First, just how *strong* a notion of providence does one wish to defend? And second, what understanding of human (or, more generally, of creaturely) *freedom* is one employing? Let me address these questions in turn.

Traditionally, Christians have endorsed a fairly strong notion of divine providence. God is seen as having solely and freely created all that is (or at least all *contingent* things). His creation is seen as having taken place according to a providential plan that is specific, complete, and unchanging. Given this plan, God knows precisely and without doubt all that has happened, is happening, and will happen. Nothing occurs that he has not foreseen; nothing surprises him; nothing takes place that he has not intended or at least permitted. And all that occurs is, in a way that we see but indistinctly, woven by him through his active engagement in human events into a world that fully manifests his sovereignty, omniscience, and love.

In recent years, this strong notion of providence has increasingly come under attack. Process theologians, questioning God's independence as a creator or his ability to interfere with his creatures' free activities, have offered radical alterations to the view<sup>4</sup> (see Chapter 24). Less radical, but (as I see it) more influential has been the alternative picture of providence offered by Open Theists, according to which God's plan for the world is more general than specific, his knowledge of the future limited, and his projects subject to significant risk. But to fully explain the "softened" notion of providence Open Theists endorse, we need to turn to the second of the two questions listed earlier: How are we to understand freedom?

Consider the following three claims:

- (1) Some human actions are free
- (2) All human actions are ultimately determined by events or substances not under the control of those human agents themselves.
- (3) It is not possible that a free human action be ultimately determined by events or substances not under the control of its human agent.

Each of these three propositions has considerable *prima facie* plausibility. The belief that we act freely at least some of the time strikes many (perhaps most) of us as obvious, and as essential to our view of ourselves as morally responsible persons. Hence, (1) seems right. To think of any action as totally undetermined – as not ultimately the consequence of *something* (the agents' character and reasons, or prior conditions and the laws of nature, or God's all-determining will, or the like) other than the agent *qua* substance – is to make

3 What follows in the remainder of this section is a somewhat simplified presentation of material I have developed more fully elsewhere. See Flint (1997) and especially the first three chapters of Flint (1998). Also, though I will (for the sake of simplicity) henceforth speak of three theories of providence, the reader should remember that each of the three is best thought of as a family of genuinely distinct but relevantly similar theories.

4 For a short introduction to process theology, see Griffin (1997). The view (along with objections to it) is also discussed with admirable clarity in Hasker (1994, 138–143).

the action appear to be but a chance, out-of-the-blue, roll-the-dice occurrence, the sort of thing for which we would not ordinarily hold an agent accountable. So (2), though perhaps less alluring than (1), also seems attractive. And the same goes for (3). For part of what is involved (at least in typical cases) in saying that an agent is free is that the agent could have done otherwise. But how could we sensibly think that an agent could have done otherwise if we say that her action was determined by events or substances over which that agent had no control?

We have here, then, three claims each of which individually has much to commend it. The problem, of course, is that the three are incompatible; if any two are true, the third must be false. One could bring consistency to one's beliefs by surrendering all three of the trio, or by abandoning two. But the attractiveness of the individual propositions makes so drastic a solution seem ill-advised. More reasonable, one might think, would be to hold on to as many of the three as one could. That is, the most plausible course seems to be "sacrificing" one of the three while maintaining the other two. This strategy leads to three possible outcomes – outcomes that, oddly enough, correspond to the three basic positions on human freedom.

First, one might abandon (1) so as to hold on to (2) and (3). That is, one might hold that human actions are indeed determined in a manner inconsistent with their being free, and conclude that we need to abandon the claim to freedom. The name typically given to this view is *hard determinism*.

Second, one could salvage (1) and (3) by jettisoning (2). Human freedom is a reality, but one that is incompatible with any of the types of determinism countenanced by (2). In the contemporary discussion, this position is most commonly called *libertarianism*.

Finally, one could sacrifice (3) in order to safeguard (1) and (2). We do indeed perform actions that are free and ultimately externally determined in the way that (2) states; hence, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, (3) must be false. *Compatibilism* is the name commonly given to this view.

We have thus far identified two general positions regarding the "strength" of providence (the traditional, strong view, and the revisionary, weaker views) and three general stances regarding freedom (hard determinism, libertarianism, and compatibilism). This might lead the mathematically inclined to conclude that we could generate six overall potential theories of providence. And, in a sense, this is surely true. But three of these locations in logical space are largely uninhabited. Relatively few traditional theists have been attracted to hard determinism. The denial of human freedom, and the subsequent surrender of any strong sense of human responsibility, has not proved enticing to many Christians.<sup>5</sup> Hence, combining hard determinism with either strong or weak pictures of providence is rare. Similarly, it is hard to see why a compatibilist would need or want to embrace anything less than the traditional strong providential picture.

We are thus left with three general theories of providence. And we can more explicitly delineate them by considering their stances toward two claims:

5 To be sure, there have been exceptions. On the contemporary scene, the most impressive has probably been Derk Pereboom. See Pereboom (2001) and especially Pereboom (2011). One could reasonably view the kind of theological determinism Pereboom so ably defends as offering a fourth theory of providence. But I find it more helpful to view it as simply a more stringent variation on the Thomist theory that will be delineated later in this section.

- (4) The strong, traditional picture of providence is correct.
- (5) The libertarian view of freedom is correct.

Those who embrace each of these claims are typically referred to as *Molinists*. Those who endorse (4) but reject (5) are called by many names (including Augustinians, Banezians, Calvinists, and others), but I will refer to them as *Thomists*.<sup>6</sup> Finally, those who hold on to (5) but discard (4) are the aforementioned *Open Theists*.<sup>7</sup> Let me now outline these three theories in just a bit more detail.

*Molinists* maintain, in effect, that theology commits us to (4), while common sense leads us to (5). The strong, traditional picture of providence is traditional for a reason: Scripture and tradition support it, and do so to such an extent that weaker pictures of providence were virtually unknown until the last century. The libertarian view is attractive intuitively, and especially attractive when we consider the defects of its rivals.<sup>8</sup> With (4) and (5), then, we have two assertions that have considerable prephilosophical allure. In combining them, we are simply holding on to positions that independently call for our fealty.

On the surface, though, this might seem a hard combination of views to hold, for at least two reasons. First, if *God* truly is in control of the world, in the uncompromising manner that (4) suggests, how can *we* be in control of our actions, as (5) says? In rejecting (2), are we not rejecting the claim that anyone other than the agent is calling the shots when it comes to her free actions? And if (say) Annie is calling the shots, is it not clear that God is not? Second, if (as the advocates of strong providence insist) God has complete foreknowledge of everything that Annie will do, how can any of her actions be free? God cannot be mistaken in what he believes; so, if he believes in advance that Annie will (say) go get her gun at a certain time, how can she do other than get her gun at that time?

*Molinists* respond to these challenges by suggesting that once we understand *how* God controls and foreknows the free actions of his creatures, the apparent threat to combining (4) with (5) collapses. Crucial here is the recognition that God's knowledge falls into three distinct categories. First, God knows necessary truths, truths that are in no sense dependent upon any free act of his will. Since it is part of God's very nature to know such things, Molina referred to this as the category of *natural knowledge*. Second, some truths known by God are contingent and subject to his will. *That Barack Obama was elected president in 2008* is true, but need not have been, and its truth was up to God: he could, in any of many ways, have prevented it from being true. (For example, he could have decided not to create Obama at all.) Since truths of this sort are at least in part a function of God's free decisions, *Molinists* refer to them as components of God's *free knowledge*. But between natural knowledge and free knowledge lies a third conceivable category – of truths that (like elements of natural knowledge) are not under God's control, but that (like parts of his free knowledge)

6 I do so with considerable trepidation, since not all readers of St. Thomas will agree that his view of providence is properly situated as one which endorses (4) and rejects (5). Still, there is a long tradition (at least within the history of Catholic theology) of referring to the position as the Thomist one, and each of the alternative names comes with similar disadvantages.

7 Process theism counts as a kind of Open Theism given this delineation. Advocates of either view are likely to shudder at the amalgamation, but I trust that charity will prevail.

8 For a clear and influential statement of the intuitions and arguments supporting libertarianism, see Chisholm (1966). The libertarian view has been developed in a number of ways; see, for example, the essays in part VI of Kane (2002).



are only contingently true. Since truths of this sort are situated in this middle region, Molina cleverly referred to this as the category of *middle knowledge*.

Middle knowledge, according to Molinists, provides the key to dismantling our two challenges (regarding divine control and divine foreknowledge) to the combination of (4) and (5). For among the truths that God would know via middle knowledge, say Molinists, are *counterfactuals of creaturely freedom* – conditionals stating (roughly), for any free being, what that agent would freely do in any circumstances compatible with its freedom in which it might be placed.<sup>9</sup> Since circumstances do not determine what a free being will do, such conditionals will be contingent; and since not even God can determine his creatures' free actions, these counterfactuals will not be under his control. Knowing such truths, though, allows God to exercise significant providential control over his world through the free actions of his creatures. He cannot *make* Annie freely get her gun, but he may well be able to achieve that same end by putting her in circumstances where he sees that she would *freely* get her gun. And, of course, once he decides to put her in such circumstances, he foreknows what she will freely do. So a God provided with middle knowledge has both the control and the foreknowledge that the strong picture of providence requires, thereby allowing us to maintain both (4) and (5). Or so, at least, the Molinist maintains.

*Thomists* beg to differ. While Molinists pay lip service to the kind of divine sovereignty that (4) demands, say the Thomists, they in fact weaken God's control over his world in ways that a traditionalist cannot accept. As first cause, God must be seen as the ultimate determiner of all contingent events. And this simply is not so on the Molinist scheme. Molinists say that counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are true or false in a brute sense; neither the agents referred to by these conditionals nor God himself cause them to be true. And, of course, the free actions that God's creatures end up performing are also, on the Molinist view, not in the final analysis up to God. Such diminishment of divine sovereignty is simply unacceptable if we are to retain the traditional picture of providence in fact as well as in word. And the real culprit here, says the Thomist, is easy to see: the libertarian view of freedom.<sup>10</sup> Granting the kind of radical autonomy that (5) ascribes to free creatures is simply incompatible with God's status as *prima causa*, a status sanctioned by scripture and tradition. To fully embrace (4), then, we need to surrender (5).

And with what, one might ask, do we replace (5)? Different Thomists offer competing responses.<sup>11</sup> At the most extreme level, a Thomist might say that we do not really need to replace it with *anything*, since the affirmation of human freedom is a sign of arrogance inappropriate to one who has fully accepted the gospel message concerning God's real place in the universe. Most Thomists, though, are unwilling to go this far; most insist that the rejection of *libertarian* freedom (as I have defined the term) is not the rejection of freedom *tout court*. How exactly we are to understand human freedom depends, they suggest, upon

9 The "roughly" that I have placed in parentheses should probably be italicized, underlined, and bolded. For a more careful explanation of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, see Flint (1998, especially 46–48).

10 Care needs to be exercised here. Many of those I am labeling Thomists deny that their view involves a rejection of libertarianism. And they are surely right for some understandings of what libertarianism amounts to. My claim is only that Thomism involves denying libertarianism *as I have analyzed it here* – that is, as essentially involving the rejection of (2).

11 Variations are not unique to Thomism. Each of our three general theories of providence can be developed in a number of different ways, and many advocates of one or another such variation spend as much time attacking "heretics" within their own camp as they do "infidels" outside it.

exactly how we are to understand God's determination of all that occurs in the world. And here many proposals have been offered. Some Thomists have suggested that God's causally determining our actions via prior events is compatible with those actions being free. Others have argued that such *prior* determination would eliminate human freedom, but that *simultaneous* determining events (e.g., bestowals of efficacious grace) do not. (For more on such views, see Flint 1988; 1998.) Some, though, have argued that while any kind of *event* causal determination of actions is incompatible with their being free, avenues for divine control are still available. God can simply directly, and without any intervening events (such as acts of will), cause us to behave as we do, much in the way that agent-causationists say we directly, and without any intermediary events, cause our free actions or at least the initial elements in such actions – our choices, or undertakings, or whatever. (For a clear statement and defense of such a view, see Grant 2010.) Still others (see especially McCann 1995; 2005) suggest that agent-causal language is inappropriate here, since it implies that God and his creatures exist at the same ontological level. God's determination of our actions is better seen as akin to the manner in which an author determines the actions that the characters in his novel perform; the determination is real, but does not occur by the author's entering into the realm of the characters and acting upon them, either via event causality or via agent causality.

Because they deny the need for the separate category that Molinists call middle knowledge, Thomists are sometimes thought to reject the Molinist claim that there are true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. But this is not the case; though Thomists differ among themselves on this point, the majority historically has agreed that there are such conditionals, and that God knows them. But he does not know them as elements of middle knowledge – as contingent truths beyond God's control. Counterfactuals of creaturely freedom can be viewed either as *necessary* truths (necessary because, e.g., their antecedents include divine activity logically sufficient to guarantee their consequents) *beyond* God's control or as *contingent* truths (with sufficiently thin antecedents) *under* his control. Either way, divine sovereignty is not jeopardized by such conditionals, and the Thomist can cheerfully accept them.

*Open Theists* (or, as I shall sometimes call them, Openists) share the Thomists' disdain for the *via media* propounded by the Molinists, but differ from the Thomists' analysis of how to rectify matters. None of the Thomist attempts to offer an acceptable alternative to the libertarian notion of freedom strike Open Theists as even remotely plausible. Hence, in rejecting (5) so as to safeguard divine sovereignty, the Thomists have gone in the wrong direction. But the Molinist attempt to reconcile (4) and (5) is also a failure. If humans are free in the full libertarian sense, then there simply is no fact of the matter as to how they *would* (and Openists often add a *definitely* here) act in specified circumstances, for there would be nothing to ground (or to cause) the truth of such conditionals. Middle knowledge is a snare and a delusion (well, at least a delusion); not even God can know in advance how a being would freely act in a certain situation unless he puts the person in that situation and looks to see what she does. Therefore, we need to amend the traditional, strong picture of providence that Molinists and Thomists alike see themselves as defending. A God without middle knowledge cannot know in advance how his free creatures will behave. Hence, the complete foreknowledge that traditionalists have ascribed to God needs to be abandoned. This means that divine control over human events is, in effect, somewhat more limited under Open Theism; God will often be in situations where he sees that there is nothing he can do that will guarantee a particular outcome if that outcome depends on

free creaturely actions. God unavoidably takes risks in creating a world in which libertarian freedom is present; he will in such a world be putting his creatures in situations where he realizes that there is a genuine possibility that they will not freely react in the ways he anticipates or desires. For all of these reasons, the Open Theist says, we need to modify the picture of providence that has been dominant for most of the history of Christianity if we are to be serious in our endorsement of libertarianism. To hold on to (5), we need to sacrifice (4). (For two of the best-known presentations of Open Theism, see Hasker 1989 and Sanders 1998.)

At first glance, one might think that the Open Theists will need to whittle away quite severely at the strong picture of providence, so severely that little real sense of divine control or sovereignty survives. If God cannot determine everything in a world with free agents, and has no middle knowledge to use so as to guide events via those agents' free acts, then does he really have enough knowledge and power to be thought of as provident in any meaningful sense? Open theists have typically tried to respond to this objection by reminding us of the abundant power, wisdom, and resourcefulness that an Openist God would retain. Most have also claimed that the absence of middle knowledge does not entail the absence of certain types of knowledge that might prove extraordinarily helpful to God in his providential endeavors. For example, to say that God *cannot* know what Annie *would* (*definitely*) freely do if placed in a certain set of circumstances is compatible with saying that he *can* know what she would *probably* do. Indeed, he might know rather specific probabilistic claims – for example, that the probability that Annie would freely get her gun if placed in circumstances C is 0.9869 (on a scale of 0 to 1). Armed with such knowledge of probabilities, the God of Open Theism would be able to exert considerable influence over the course of events, and to pursue overall plans with a reasonable degree of confidence that they will succeed. To be sure, this is not the risk-free providence of the Molinists or of the Thomists, but it is, Openists insist, the strongest kind available to a serious libertarian.

Needless to say, each of these three theories has had both strong defenders and vigorous critics. Outlining these debates would take us too far afield from our present concern. I think it is safe to say, though, that no consensus has formed among Christian philosophers as to which of the three is most attractive, and no end to the debate is in sight.

## Theodicies, Defenses, and Theories of Providence

What implications do these differences have on responses to arguments from evil? This question is very tricky to answer, for a number of reasons. First, as already noted, there are in fact *many* arguments from evil, and replies to one such argument may need to be tailored significantly, or even completely replaced, to reply adequately to another. Second, even when a specific argument from evil is under discussion, advocates of the same theory of providence might disagree on what level of response is needed: one Molinist might say that offering a defense is perfectly adequate, while another Molinist might say that a genuine theodicy is needed to defuse the argument in question. And of course, even those who agree that a defense is adequate might disagree on what level of defense is appropriate. Is it sufficient that the purported justification be merely possible, or does it need also to be compatible with all we know – or, even stronger, does it need to be plausible, or perhaps even probable, given all else that we know? Finally, since none of our three theories is

monolithic – since any of the three pictures of providence can be developed in very different ways – what (say) one Open Theist deems a good defense (at whatever level of defense) against an argument from evil may seem inadequate or even significantly misguided to another. For a serious philosopher, then, there is (alas) no easy escape from the messy details here. One can meaningfully speak about what resources *this* specific version of (say) the Thomist theory can bring to bear against *this* specific atheological argument. But to think that we can give fully satisfying broad-brush assessments or simple answers to imprecise questions (“What do Molinists think about the problem of evil?”) is to betray a significant degree of philosophical naiveté.

Still, these points notwithstanding, trying to offer *some* general comments seems in order. Even if adopting (say) Open Theism does not entail any specific attitude toward evil, it may strongly suggest some positions and render others unattractive. So, at the risk of falling afoul of the “devil is in the details” moral of the previous paragraph, let me note two general connections between providence and theodicy.

*First*, advocates of Molinism and Thomism seem to be in a stronger position to offer theodicies or (especially) defenses with respect to *particular* evils or *specific* types of evil. Why did God allow Elfreth to get into that car crash? Because (or at least *maybe* because) he knew (either because of his all-determining decrees or due to his middle knowledge) that this specific evil would in fact engender the variety of actual outweighing goods (e.g., regarding Elfreth’s freely accepting a newfound seriousness of purpose) that have resulted from it. Since God cannot, according to Open Theists, be certain (either through decrees or through middle knowledge) that Elfreth will freely respond in this way, trying to suggest that we can offer God’s reasons (either reasons he actually had or ones that he at least might have had) so as to justify his allowing the crash is significantly more dicey. What seems more attractive, from an Openist perspective, is to hold that God adopts *general* policies for interacting with his world, policies that he sees will probably lead to good results overall and in the long run, but that can easily produce specific outcomes (such as car crashes) that on their own serve no higher good.

I believe there is validity in this distinction. But we need to be very careful not to push it too far. Consider, for example, William Hasker’s recent distinction between what he calls a *general-policy* theodicy (where we account for an evil by saying that it is “the result of a general policy which a wise and good God might well adopt”) and a *specific-benefit* one (according to which “it is necessary . . . that God’s permission of this particular evil should have consequences that are better than any that could have been obtained had God prevented the evil”) (Hasker 2011a, 282). Hasker says that Open Theists need to pursue general-policy theodicy, while Thomists and Molinists are committed to specific-benefit ones (Hasker 2011a, 284). But this claim seems to me both false (strictly speaking) and misleading (less-strictly speaking). To see why it is false, consider the type of principle to which he implies Thomists and Molinists are committed:

- (P): For any particular evil *p* that occurs, God is justified in permitting *p* only if (i) God’s permitting *p* has consequences *c*, and (ii) for any *c\** such that *c\** could have obtained had God prevented *p*, *c* is better than *c\**.

On reflection, though, few self-respecting Molinists or Thomists would make such a claim. Consider God’s permitting Elfreth’s car crash. *Could* things have turned out even better had God prevented the crash? Of course. It is at least *possible* that Elfreth would have reacted

to the crash's prevention not simply by adopting a somewhat more serious attitude toward life, but by starting down the road toward a saintly heroism that would make St. Francis look like a piker. Does this mere possibility mean that God was unjustified in allowing the crash to occur, even seeing all the good that would follow from it? It is hard to see why. So we cannot really expect Molinists or Thomists to endorse (P).

Now, one might think that we could easily rectify things here by changing Hasker's "could" to a "would" – that is, by replacing (P) with

- (P\*): For any particular evil  $p$  that occurs, God is justified in permitting  $p$  only if (i) God's permitting  $p$  has consequences  $c$ , and (ii) for any  $c^*$  such that  $c^*$  would have obtained had God prevented  $p$ ,  $c$  is better than  $c^*$ .

But it would still be misleading to see (P\*) as pointing to a fundamental divide here. The fact of the matter is that Thomists and Molinists might still have reasons to doubt (P\*). For one reason, (P\*) seems rooted in a picture of God as a consequence-maximizer, and it is not obvious that Thomists or Molinists are committed to such a picture. Furthermore, if there is no such thing as a best possible world (or, for Molinists, a best *feasible* world – i.e., a world that, given the contingently true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, is the best that God can make actual), (P\*) would seem to commit us to saying that God is *never* justified in allowing *any* evil.<sup>12</sup> And that, obviously, is not a claim Thomists or Molinists would rush to endorse. It would, I think, be *open* to Thomists or Molinists to accept (P\*), or at least something in the vicinity of (P\*), but nothing in their positions commits them to doing so, and my guess is that most would reject it.

Note also that it is fairly easy to construct an "Openist-friendly" variation on (P\*), something along the lines of

- (P\*\*): For any particular evil  $p$  that occurs, God is justified in permitting  $p$  only if (i) God's permitting  $p$  has consequences  $c$ , and (ii) for any  $c^*$  such that  $c^*$  probably would have obtained had God prevented  $p$ ,  $c$  is better than  $c^*$ .

There are, I think, reasons why an Open Theist might be reluctant to embrace (P\*\*). But I see nothing in Open Theism itself that *precludes* one from endorsing it, or (more likely) a qualified version of it. After all, many Open Theists have made much of the claim that God does indeed have quite extensive and quite specific probabilistic knowledge, and there is no reason at all that an Open Theist could not think that such knowledge opens the door to an Openish specific-benefit theodicy. Imagine, for example, an Open Theist who believes that, though God lacks middle knowledge, he knows that all (or virtually all) actions are performed in circumstances that render them *all but* determined to occur – that is, the probability of each such action, given its circumstances, is vanishingly close to 1. If an Open

12 For more on feasible worlds, see Flint (1998, 51–54). It should, perhaps, be noted here that, since neither Thomists nor Open Theists think that there *are* any counterfactuals of creaturely freedom that are both contingently true and beyond God's control, neither sees any place for the notion of a feasible world. Many theists have expressed doubts about whether there is a best possible (or feasible) world, and about whether God would be obligated to actualize the best possible (or feasible) world even if there were one. On this latter point, see especially Adams (1972).

Theist thought this were the case, then his picture of providence could be *virtually* a Molinist one. And if Molinists are naturally inclined toward specific-goods theodicies, so too could be such an Openist.

To be clear: My point is not that there is *no* difference here between Openists (on the one hand) and Thomists or Molinists (on the other). Theists of the former sort are indeed more inclined to point to general policies when addressing problems of evil, while those of the latter sorts (who of course can also appeal to general policies) have resources more conducive to contemplating specific benefits as playing a role in God's justification. But the differences here are subtle and hard to pin down with the kind of specificity analytic philosophers congenitally crave.<sup>13</sup>

A *second* overall connection between theories of providence and theodicy is that instances of the latter often take for granted one of the former. That is, a number of specific defenses or theodicies presuppose that a certain theory of providence is correct (or at least that one of the three theories is wrong) and cannot readily be accepted by those endorsing competing theories. To illustrate this point, I will briefly examine one defense and one theodicy, each of which has been promoted by Alvin Plantinga.

Consider first the free will defense, as presented and defended in magisterial fashion by Plantinga (see especially chapter 9 of Plantinga 1974) (see Chapter 2). This defense is a direct response to a deductive argument from evil, an argument claiming that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of the omnipotent, omniscient, all-loving God of the Christian tradition. Plantinga attempts to show that, if we assume Molinism (a view which he finds plausible), this allegation of logical incompatibility can be refuted. To make a very long story scandalously short, Plantinga argues (in effect) that the truth of Molinism means that only some possible worlds are feasible for God. Since it *could* be the case that all worlds with moral goodness (roughly, good that results from the actions of agents free in the libertarian sense) but no moral evil are *not* feasible, and since it is reasonable to think that God would desire a world that contains moral goodness, moral evil *could* have been the cost God had to pay for the benefit of moral goodness, and thus his creation of such a world is not logically incompatible with his goodness. (Note that this argument is presented and explicitly intended as a defense, not as a theodicy; hence the italicized *coulds* in my summary of it.)

The Plantingean free will defense has been the subject of enormous controversy (see Chapter 2). Some have questioned one or another of the specific moves made in the course of the argument; others have wondered about the value of the argument in dealing with related versions of the deductive problem of evil, versions that focus on the amount or types of evil in the world.<sup>14</sup> But it is difficult to see how the free will defense, in anything like the version Plantinga offers, could succeed unless Molinism was true. For as we have seen, if either Thomism or Open Theism is true, there simply is no place for the notion of

13 It is worth pointing out that the kind of defense (at least with respect to certain types of evil) offered by Eleonore Stump (see Stump 2010) can plausibly be seen as a specific-benefits defense, even though (her affection for Aquinas notwithstanding!) her approach seems to be that of an Open Theist. Not surprisingly, Hasker calls her to task for taking the specific-benefits route. See Hasker (2011b, especially 444–450).

14 Plantinga addresses many of these objections in Plantinga (1974). For a recent attempt to show how Plantinga's free will defense can be extended to reconcile theism with the existence of *nonmoral* evil, see Boyce (2011).



a feasible world, a notion central to this type of response. Hence, this is a defense that seem open only to the Molinist.<sup>15</sup>

Though never wavering in his endorsement of the free will defense, Plantinga has in more recent days suggested that Christian philosophers can go further – that they can actually offer a plausible theodicy. From the Christian perspective, Plantinga argues, *incarnation* and *atonement* are particularly valuable features of a world (see Chapter 18). That God would show his love for fallen mankind by taking on our nature and by dying so as to reconcile the world to his father is a breathtakingly marvelous state of affairs. Indeed, Plantinga finds it so marvelous that he is inclined to accept the claim that “any world with incarnation and atonement is a better world than any world without it – or at any rate better than any world in which God does nothing comparable to incarnation and atonement” (Plantinga 2004, 10).<sup>16</sup> But our freely responding to God’s offer of salvation presupposes that we are in need of salvation; that is to say, atonement is possible only in a world with sin. And thus, Plantinga concludes, we have the ingredients to answer the question, “Why does God permit evil?” He permits it because “he wanted to actualize one of the best of all the possible worlds; all those worlds contain atonement, hence they all contain sin and evil” (Plantinga 2004, 12). What we have here, he concludes, is not merely a defense, but “a successful theodicy.”

Like his free will defense, Plantinga’s theodicy has not elicited universal obeisance. What is noteworthy for our purposes, though, are its presuppositions with respect to providence. For Plantinga explicitly employs Molinist assumptions at several points in his presentation.<sup>17</sup> Now, I am not sure that such assumptions are *essential* to the argument. It is hard to see why an advocate of the Thomist theory of providence could not, with minimal alterations, also endorse Plantinga’s theodicy. God’s relationship to the sin that makes salvation and atonement possible (and to the repentance that is part of salvation) may be more deterministic than Plantinga would like; still, assuming that deterministic picture, the story Plantinga tells about the beauty of a world containing salvation, and of the justification atonement offers for God’s allowing sin, can be affirmed by the Thomist as readily as by the Molinist. With Open Theists, though, things seem rather different. For as we have seen, the notion of risk is crucial to Open Theism. Lacking middle knowledge or the ability to determine free actions, God would simply have no way of knowing whether his permission of evil would lead to the free repentance that full reconciliation with God requires. Even if he desired above all else a world with incarnation and atonement, he could engender a world with the former but not the latter. It is not clear, then, that many Open Theists would be attracted to Plantinga’s suggestion that he has offered us “a successful theodicy.”<sup>18</sup>

15 For interesting discussions of the relationship between the free will defense and Molinism, see especially Wierenga (1989, 126–132), and Perszyk (1998). It is worth noting that McCann takes it as obvious that if (or, as he would say, because) Molinism is unacceptable, “the standard Free Will Defense is a failure” (McCann 2011, 260).

16 Plantinga notes (on 11 of this piece) that he could actually get by with somewhat weaker assumptions, but the differences are not essential to our discussion.

17 See pp. 6, 20, and 24.

18 It is worth noting that, though there may be no flat inconsistency in Open Theists’ accepting Plantinga’s theodicy, they might be unable to accept his Supralapsarian spin on it – his suggestion that “the decree to provide incarnation and atonement and hence salvation is prior [in the sense of being God’s ultimate aim] to the decree to permit [the] fall into sin.” For as we have seen, God would know from the start that he might be unable to obtain a world with atonement. It is hard to imagine that the God of the Openists would choose as his *single* ultimate aim a state of affairs that he knows might never be attained.



## A Patently Partisan Epilogue

The major goal of this chapter has been to elucidate some of the connections between theories of providence and responses to arguments from evil. I have not, for the most part, endeavored to take sides. But honesty compels me to admit that I am not a neutral onlooker to these discussions. Hence, a few words concerning my own views might, in this concluding section, be in order.

My own preference for the Molinist account of providence over its rivals has been stated in detail elsewhere; see especially Flint (1998). The arguments I offer on its behalf have relatively little to do with arguments from evil. Nevertheless, I do in fact believe that Molinism does a better job in dealing with evil than do the alternative theories of providence – though not *enough* better to make that the major reason for accepting it.

The Molinist picture is preferable to the Thomist one, in my view, almost solely because the libertarian picture of freedom is preferable to the alternatives. If we surrender that libertarian picture, we may be limiting to an extent what we can say about evil (e.g., as we saw, a Plantingean free will defense seems unavailable). Still, a number of responses (including the Plantingean theodicy discussed earlier, not to mention some variation on the skeptical theist position outlined later in this volume) seem tenable for the Thomist.

The options for the Open Theist, it seems to me, are more limited. Some have suggested that God's more meager noetic toolkit, and his consequent need to take risks if he creates free creatures, mean that his responsibility for the evils that occur are mitigated under Open Theism. My view has always been the opposite. An Open Theist God would have a multitude of wonderful, thoroughly *deterministic* worlds among which he could choose, ones where he could be assured that all would work out well. Would not a loving God with the limited knowledge the Openists assume make some such world, rather than risk calamity after calamity by creating a world with free beings? Hugh McCann has put this point especially forcefully:

No matter how concerned and loving he [God] may be, no matter how powerfully he may attempt to win us over, we are on this [Open Theist] view out of God's control. Thus there is always the chance, however remote, that his plans for us will be utterly dashed, that his overtures to us will be rejected – even to the point, one supposes, of our all being lost – that with advancing knowledge we will use our freedom to wreak ever greater horror, and that when it comes to finding friends, creation will for God turn out to be a complete disaster. Willingness to take chances may be laudable in some cases, but to entrust an enterprise of this importance to the beneficence of our tribe must surely be deemed irresponsible. (McCann 2011, 251)

Nor is this problem of an irresponsible divinity the only one the Open Theist faces in this regard. As we saw, the Plantingean theodicy seems closed to the Openist, at least without significant alteration. Furthermore, the Incarnation itself poses problems for Open Theism that neither Molinism nor Thomism face. The latter two positions can (assuming their general providential pictures) make sense of the traditional idea that the incarnate Son freely, via his created human nature, dies for our sins; reconciling such freedom with an Open Theist position is, at best, exceedingly difficult. Or so at least I have argued, without (to my knowledge) any attempt by Openists to respond; see Flint (2004). So, to the extent that a fully developed and plausible Christological picture is to play some role in one's defense or theodicy (Plantingean or not), Open Theism seems to be in trouble.

Again, my point is not that problems with evil pose an insuperable obstacle to one's accepting Open Theism. *No one*, whatever his or her picture of providence, has an easy time with such problems, and *everyone*, I think, has skeptical theism at least as a kind of fallback position. Still, to the extent that one is inclined toward offering a theodicy or a defense, one is best situated to do so from the standpoint of the Molinist.

## Acknowledgment

I am grateful to two anonymous readers for their comments on a prior version of this chapter.

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# A Christian Theodicy

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The invitation to contribute a chapter to this volume with the title, “A Christian Theodicy,” produced mixed reactions. On the one hand were appreciation and interest in taking on a challenge. On the other hand were dismay and the inclination to decline. The latter reaction has at least two sources: one, the concern that this is a grand title, and who am I to speak for Christians; and two, the sense that I am not alone in finding the whole endeavor of theodicy somewhat distasteful. It is tempting to think that, when bad things happen to good people and when Christians attempt to console those who suffer with reasons – bar-raising them with alleged divine justifications for permitting such things – they ought simply to shut up. There is little worse than suffering a tremendous loss and, while struggling to cope with it, rather than being embraced humanely and assisted in a tangible way, being told by others that the horrible thing that has happened is “a part of God’s plan” or “is for your own good” or that “everything happens for a reason.” An appropriate response to such claims might be something along the lines of an urge to wring the other’s neck or, less dramatically, an urge to put him in his place with some sharp – or at least polite but firm – remark to the effect, “you don’t know what you’re talking about!”

The previous paragraph is meant to highlight a few points. First, I do not claim to know how any Christian whatsoever ought to think about the problem of evil. The ideas I explore in this chapter are, I believe, recognizably Christian in theme. However, Christianity, of course, comes in a variety of forms, and Christians think in a wide variety of ways. The free will theodicy obviously has played a prominent role within the Christian tradition, as have justifications of suffering in terms of character building and retribution for sin (see Chapter 14). My aim is not to support the different account I sketch and explore here as “more Christian” than other ways of approaching the issue. I do not, for instance, attempt to give the thoughts in this chapter pride of place over other approaches by citing scriptures or particular church doctrinal statements, declarations, or creeds. Second, I still do think that the best way for a Christian, and indeed any person, to respond to those who suffer is with compassion, which can both prompt actions that bring practical relief and bring

comfort to the psyche.<sup>1</sup> Alleged divine justifications, on the other hand, are often the last thing a suffering person needs to hear. With respect to offering theodicies to those enduring pain and loss, “*Just shut up*” remains, to my mind, decent advice.

Sometimes, however, people do want to know how to think about the terrible things that happen, particularly those that happen with absolutely no apparent rhyme or reason, unlike, for instance, the case of an habitual smoker who develops lung cancer (although, even in that case, a spouse might wonder why her loved one developed the disease, given that other heavy smokers do not). And it does seem that Christians ought to have something to say, when asked how a painful turn of events might be reconciled with the existence of the God in whom they believe. There is a difference between constructing a theodicy on the one hand, and presenting it unprompted and at an inopportune time to a person who suffers on the other. I hope that the first is permissible, or at least is not morally reprehensible, even while the second is not.<sup>2</sup>

So what in the world should a Christian say? It seems clear to me, first of all, that a hybrid case has the best shot at plausibility. That is, it seems that no one line of theodicy should have to bear the weight of covering all the cases of trauma, catastrophe, and blight we find in the world. A free will theodicy, for instance, might work for a range of instances, such as murder, betrayal, and war; however, many people have difficulty finding the line of thought plausible when it comes to explaining instances of natural evil. A further problem is that, even if a free will theodicy can credibly cover both moral evils and the suffering resulting from tsunamis, hurricanes and the like, it rests on the largely undefended implicit premise that free will is enormously valuable, and it is not fully clear that this is so<sup>3</sup> (see Chapters 14 and 28). A punishment theodicy – roughly the notion that our ailments and sorrows are justified as retribution for our wrongdoing – is limited in scope but may work in covering some cases. A soul-making or character-building theodicy, such as the one defended by John Hick, faces instances for which it has difficulty accounting – such as the endurance of painful terminal diseases on the part of infants and very young children, who have no opportunity for growth of character – but then, I admit, so does the different line of theodicy I will go on to sketch (see Chapter 14).

In what follows, I set out an alternative – or perhaps better, supplement – to these standard theodicies, one that I call *the divine intimacy theodicy*. My aim here is to present it as an interesting line of thought worthy of further exploration, one that perhaps can cover some instances of personal suffering.<sup>4</sup> The divine intimacy theodicy likely will not help to account for the suffering of nonhuman animals, although this depends on the capacities of members of other species (see Chapter 8).

The core idea is that, sometimes when persons suffer, they experience connection with God (see Chapter 15). We see this, for instance, in the case of Job, whose poignant cries of

1 I defend an account of compassion and emphasize the central role it should play in response to suffering, particularly in the area of medicine, in Laura Ekstrom (2012), “Liars, Medicine, and Compassion,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*. I take compassion to have three components: a cognitive component, a feeling component, and a motivational component. A compassionate person recognizes that another individual is indeed suffering rather than ignoring or denying that fact, feels pained by this recognition, and is moved to attempt to assist.

2 For debate on this issue, see Chapter 25 in this volume by Nick Trakakis.

3 I explore this problem in Laura Ekstrom (forthcoming), “The Cost of Freedom,” *Libertarianism and Theism*, edited by Daniel Speak and Kevin Timpe.

4 Cf. Ekstrom (2004).

protest against the Almighty, in the midst of his unbearable losses, become the stunning declaration, “My eyes had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5). In his suffering, Job reports, he has experienced God; God has shown himself, made himself known. We find a similar report in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s account of a vision of the divine. As we struggle to find an explanation for God’s allowance of suffering, “instead of hearing an answer,” he writes, “we catch sight of God himself scraped and torn.” Wolterstorff attests: “Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God” (Wolterstorff 1987, 80–81). God is seen or known in the experience of suffering itself.

William Rowe (1979), Paul Draper (1989), and many other nontheists have argued that instances of pain and suffering count as evidence against the existence of God (see Chapters 4 and 5). Perhaps, however, at least some such instances are, rather, avenues to knowledge of God. Wolterstorff and Job are not alone. Many individuals have reported that the periods of suffering they have endured have been marked by closeness with God, with a vision of the divine, or with a sense of God’s caring presence. In fact, some report that their occasions of suffering have afforded the most clear and arresting glimpses of the character of God that they have ever obtained. Perhaps, then, some instances of suffering qualify as religious experiences, experiences that provide evidence for, rather than against, the existence of God. Thoughts along these lines are suggested in the work of such contemporary philosophers as Marilyn Adams (1986, 1989, 1999), Eleonore Stump (1985, 1994, 1999, 2012), and Wolterstorff (1987, 1988), as well as in the writings of Christian mystics and saints of the medieval and later periods. This is not so surprising: is not suffering as a means to divine intimacy just what we would expect of a God who, according to Christian scripture and tradition, assumed human form and suffered with and for us?

In response, then, to the question, “Why would the divine agent permit instances of evil?”, perhaps a reply applicable to some instances of personal suffering is this: in order to provide occasions in which we can perceive God, understand him to some degree, even meet God directly. I go on to explore the plausibility of this line of thought.

## **The Character of Religious Experience**

The array of experiences that are taken to fall under the category of “religious experience” makes it difficult to give a general characterization. The prophet Isaiah reports, “I heard the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?’ And I answered, Here am I; send me,” (Isaiah 6). John of the Cross ([1618] 1962, 78) describes a religious experience as one in which the understanding of the soul “is now moved and informed by . . . the supernatural light of God, and has been changed into the Divine, for its understanding and that of God are now both one.” Teresa of Avila reports experience in which one is:

conscious of having been most delectably wounded . . . [The soul] complains to its Spouse with words of love, and even cries aloud, being unable to help itself, for it realizes that He is present but will not manifest Himself in such a way as to allow it to enjoy Him, and this is a great grief, though a sweet and delectable one. . . . So powerful is the effect of this upon the soul that it becomes consumed with desire, yet cannot think what to ask, so clearly conscious is it of the presence of God. (Teresa of Avila [1577] 1961, 135–136)

Rudolf Otto describes religious experience as that in which the soul is “held speechless, trembles inwardly to the farthest fibre of its being,” as it faces something so forceful and

overwhelming that one feels oneself to be “dust and ashes as against majesty.” The experience is one of “fear and trembling,” but also “wonderfulness and rapture” (Otto 1936, 17–26 and 31–33).

In each of these descriptions, it is suggested that the subject of a religious experience takes the experience to be of something objectively real and, moreover, that the objective reality experienced is religiously significant. In many instances in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the objective reality experienced is taken to be God himself, the perfectly good, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent creator of the universe. An experience might count as religious in this tradition as well, however, if its subject takes it to be an experience of an objectively existing holy Other, angel, demon, saint, or other religiously significant object.

William Alston (1991, 35) suggests an understanding of the term “religious experience” along these lines, as “(putative) direct awareness of God.” It is “putative” so as not to beg any questions concerning the veridicality of the experience; religious experience is one that the subject takes to be direct awareness of God, whether or not it is God of which she is aware. This awareness might be achieved by a perceptual faculty of some sort or by some cluster of perceptual faculties, which might include a distinctive faculty for discerning the divine, a sort of spiritual sensing faculty. Alvin Plantinga proposes that human beings have such a faculty – what John Calvin termed the “*sensus divinitatis*” – that enables us to be aware of God’s presence, actions, and intentions. If we were to have such a faculty, then in having a religious experience, we would be aware of God in a way that is analogous to our sensory perception of the physical world.

Examples of religious experience as thus far characterized include a sense of God’s presence during prayer or worship, a vision of the divine, an auditory experience of God, and an awareness of God’s nearness. A Christian believer might report experiencing God in nature or through an overwhelming sense of God’s forgiveness. A nontheist might have a religious experience as well, as in Saul’s experience of being overwhelmed by a blinding light and hearing the voice of God on the road to Damascus.

We might understand the category of religious experience more broadly. Notice the aspect of union with God, the sense of one’s understanding becoming like that of God’s, in the words of John of the Cross earlier. Perhaps we might understand the term “religious experience” to apply both, first, to putative experiences of an objective reality that is religiously significant (including an awareness of God) and, second, to experiences that are of the same sort as experiences of a divine agent. On the Christian tradition, we might describe religious experiences of this second type as experiences like those of one of the three persons comprising God. So as not to beg any questions concerning the reality of the object of the experience, we can describe the second type of religious experience as experience like what God would experience were God to exist with a nature as depicted by Christian scripture and tradition.

## Suffering as Religious Experience

Might instances of suffering count as religious experiences? A great deal of testimonial evidence supports the claim that some occasions of suffering provide a glimpse of God. Consider, for instance, the divine vision experienced by Julian of Norwich ([1670] 1984, 66) in the midst of suffering a severe illness for which she had received last rites: “At once I saw the red blood trickling down under the garland, hot, fresh, and plentiful, just as it



did at the time of his passion when the crown of thorns was pressed on to the blessed head of God-and-Man. . . . And I had a strong, deep, conviction that it was he himself.” She recounts that, in her suffering, she perceived God himself: “I saw that he is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love,” (Julian of Norwich [1670] 1993, 88). Many individuals in sorrow and pain have reported a vision of the divine or a feeling of God’s nearness and comfort in their distress.

I suppose one might say that, in the sort of case I have just described, the individual involved has a religious experience *while* suffering, but that the suffering is not itself a religious experience. Just as someone might have an awareness of God while experiencing great joy or while worshipping in comfort, someone might have an awareness of God while in pain, but that does not imply that the pain itself is religious in character. Perhaps this is right. Suffering nonetheless does provide a special context in which one can experience particularly vividly the loving care and supportive presence of another person. Notice, as well, that some instances of suffering might themselves qualify as religious experiences of the second type: experiences like those of God. Suppose that, as on traditional Christian doctrine, God created persons in order for them to love and to be intimate with him and to glorify him forever. Suppose that persons were once in a state of closeness with God, but that they chose to rebel in disobedience, with the consequence that we suffer physical and emotional pain, as well as the spiritual pain of being out of harmony with the Creator. Suppose that God enacted a plan for reestablishing our harmony with him, which involved his taking on human form and suffering rejection, torture, execution, and resurrection from death.<sup>5</sup>

From the perspective of one who adopts these suppositions, suffering itself is an experience that one shares with the divine agent, and so it may serve as an avenue to knowledge of, and intimacy with, God. Viewed in this light, human suffering might be taken to be a kind of privilege in that it allows one to share in some of the experience of God, thus giving one a window into understanding his nature. For the Christian, in particular, occasions of enduring rejection, pain and loss can be opportunities for identification with the person of Jesus Christ. Intimacy with Christ gained through suffering provides deeper appreciation of his passion.<sup>6</sup> I understand the notion of intimacy or identification with Christ in a sympathetic rather than a mystical sense. The suggestion is not that the human sufferer bears Christ’s actual sufferings since, first, it is not clear what would be the point of such

5 Michael Tooley presents a series of critical questions challenging the plausibility of this sort of account in his “The Problem of Evil.” Tooley’s (2009) objections are particularly directed at the story Peter van Inwagen gives (van Inwagen 2006) in response to the problem of evil.

6 Marilyn McCord Adams similarly suggests that instances of suffering, even horrendous ones, might be made *meaningful* by being integrated into the sufferer’s relationship with God through identification with Christ, understood either as sympathetic identification – in which each person suffers his own pain, enabling the human sufferer to know what it is like for Christ – or as mystical identification – in which the human sufferer literally experiences a share of Christ’s pain. Alternately, Adams suggests, meaningfulness may derive from suffering serving as a vision into the inner life of God, either because God is not impassible, or because the sheer intensity of the experience gives one a glimpse of what it is like to be beyond joy and sorrow. She proposes as well that sufferings might be made meaningful through defeat by divine gratitude which, when expressed by God in the afterlife, gives one full and unending joy. “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Vol. 63 (1989), pp. 297–310; and *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell University Press, 1999).

bearing and, second, the mystical view would seem to require quite peculiar views concerning pain. Rather, the idea is that the sufferer may sympathetically identify with Christ in sharing similar experience, as any other two persons identify with each other in the loose sense that they connect with, appreciate, or understand each other better when they share experiences of the same or similar types.

## **The Value of Relationships**

Is the good depicted here – closeness with God – worth it? Can it serve to justify some instances of suffering?

In support of an affirmative answer, notice that our relationships are among the most important things in our lives. They structure and give meaning to our existence. We organize our time and our priorities in light of them. They contribute to our sense of self. If positive and deep, relationships immensely enhance our well-being. Shared experiences facilitate the flourishing of our relationships by promoting mutual understanding. If I experience something that you have experienced as well, then we can appreciate something about each other that outsiders to our experience cannot. Consider the difference between parents, on the one hand, and adults who are not parents and who have little or no experience with the children of relatives, neighbors, or friends, on the other. Parents of whatever age, nationality, or socioeconomic class share certain experiences: childbirth – in the case of mothers – and the demands of nourishing, training, and in all ways caring for the needs of a child. This gives parents, and those like them who are closely involved in the lives of children, some commonality. We understand, for instance, at least something of what other parents in a medical facility feel, as they stand by the bedside of their seriously ill or injured child. We feel their anguish and know they are frightened; no one needs to explain this to us. Of course, an adult whose life is lived at quite a distance from all children might know in some sense that parents of seriously ill or injured children hurt and fear, but the sense of knowing in this case is more like a theoretical understanding, a projection or speculation than something “felt in the gut;” it is not an experientially based knowing.

Like those who are parents, victims of a similar sort of oppression or injustice – members of an oppressed political minority, or victims of a sexual assault – understand each other in a way that outsiders to their experience cannot. Common experiences provide a basis for conversation, and they make possible understanding of each other that is sometimes beyond words. We naturally feel affinity for those whose experiences are similar to our own, and it is easier for us to appreciate them fully than it is for us to understand persons whose family backgrounds, educations, environments, and careers are quite different from our own. In the case of romantic love, we become close by way of sharing private experiences that are shared with no one else. We can bond with others as well, by way of common illness and adversity, as in the camaraderie among survivors of breast cancer.

I have emphasized that shared experiences can deepen the connection between persons and that supportive personal relationships structure and give positive value to our lives. Given the worth of our positive relationships with human persons, it seems not unreasonable to think that a relationship with a divine person would be of enormous significance and value. Among those in the Christian tradition, there are many who speak of their relationship with Christ as the most important and cherished feature of their lives. If we

might come even partially to understand some aspect of the divine creator of the universe by way of suffering, and if we could not have achieved this understanding and closeness in any other way, then it would seem that our suffering has a great purpose.

As closeness with God achieved through sharing similar experience is valuable, so too is being supported and cared for when one is suffering. To turn to speaking in the second person: have you ever been moved to tears by the words of someone who is moved by your own pain, someone who shows that he deeply understands your situation and stands with you in feeling as you do, caring for your well-being? When you have been touched by this kind of love, all else in life that may have seemed attractive fades in importance. Supportive love is to be cherished; we do whatever we can to preserve it and to cause it to flourish. And it was suffering of some sort, some sadness, some brokenness, some disappointment or devastation, that made the connection possible, which enabled the feeling of being understood, accepted, and cared for in a profoundly meaningful way. What better can we hope for in life than to be truly loved and to have others to love ourselves? If love is at the center of it all – as it seems in our heart of hearts we know that it is – then what better place is there to look for a Christian response to the problem of evil than to love, to intimacy with another, particularly to intimacy with God himself.<sup>7</sup>

Notice that sometimes, someone who loves us, but whom we do not notice and thus whom we do not love in return, needs to do something to get our attention. Of course, God may send good things into our lives as signs that he is there and is caring for us. But good things are easy to misinterpret as being to our own credit, as merits we have earned or have made happen on our own. Is it reasonable to think that God would allow painful or traumatic events to happen in our lives so that we might notice his presence, form a relationship with him, or attend to its quality? Would the coworker aiming for a loving relationship with his officemate spill coffee on the papers on her desk, as a way of attracting her attention to him? He might, of course, but most of us would think he was misguided, that he had taken a mistaken approach if his aim was positive interaction between the two of them. Perhaps, then, if good and wise, he would not spill the coffee himself; however, given someone else's carelessness or poor choice that resulted in the spill, he might make himself available immediately to offer assistance and emotional support.<sup>8</sup> In this case, a good that can come from a disappointing event is camaraderie with the coworker who joins her in the feelings of sadness over whatever was ruined, who shares his own stories of loss, and who assists her in the cleaning up activities.

What I want to urge, then, is that perhaps in some cases, God allows us to suffer at least in part because (i) this enables us to share in experience of God himself, where within the Christian tradition the focus is on appreciating deeply the passion of Christ; and (ii) this enables us vividly to experience the loving presence of God. In both of these ways, our suffering can contribute positively to our relationship with God.

7 In her weighty and beautifully written book, *Wandering in Darkness*, Eleonore Stump suggests in words much more eloquent than my own that "suffering can be redeemed for the sufferer in personal relationship, that heart-break can be woven into joy through the reciprocity of love" (Stump 2012, xix).

8 Cases such as this one make explicit a reason I commented earlier that it is perhaps better to describe the divine intimacy as a supplement to other theodicies, rather than as a distinct and complete alternative. The case seems best accounted for both in terms of the value of human free will and the value of connection to God.

## Divine Passibility

We could broaden the appeal of the divine intimacy theodicy to non-Christian as well as Christian versions of monotheism if we were to set aside reference to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. A theist of any sort could believe that we can experience God's loving support during our trials. But to endorse the shared experience aspect of the divine intimacy theodicy, a non-Christian monotheist would need to join those philosophers who affirm, against tradition, that God is not impassible. Suppose, for instance, that God grieves over human sin. Then, in feeling deep sorrow over the neglect and abuse of children, and in feeling grief over war and pollution and poverty, a person may have experience like God's. An individual's own sorrow may be a means to having intimacy with the divine being who is affected negatively by the sorrow-worthy features and events of our world.

On the more traditional conception of the divine nature, God is not affected by anything and so cannot suffer.<sup>9</sup> The doctrine of impassibility is defended primarily by appeal to philosophical considerations, including reflection on the natures of perfection, immutability, and transcendence. One line of supporting reasoning, put very roughly, is this: a perfect being cannot change, because every change is either for the better or for the worse. But a perfect being cannot get any better; it is already perfect, having all perfections. And a perfect being cannot get any worse; otherwise, it would no longer be perfect. Hence God is changeless. So God cannot transition from experiencing calm repose to experience anger or grief to experiencing the resolution of anger or grief. A perfect God simply cannot suffer or grieve.

The doctrine of divine impassibility, however, has been criticized by a number of philosophers, including Alvin Plantinga, Charles Hartshorne, Charles Taliaferro, Kelly James Clark, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Richard Swinburne. Plantinga, for instance, affirms the existence of a God who "enters into and shares our suffering." He writes: "Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours" (Plantinga 1985, 36).

Of the considerations in favor of rejecting divine impassibility, the most significant from my perspective are reflection on the nature of goodness and consideration of the nature of love. God as traditionally conceived is not only omnipotent and omniscient, but also wholly good and perfectly loving. A number of philosophers, including Wolterstorff and Taliaferro, have registered their rejection of the Greek-influenced medieval conception of divine love as nonsuffering benevolence. The argument is that apathy, unperturbed emotional indifference to the plight of humanity, is incompatible with God's love of humanity.

Here is why the incompatibility claim is attractive. Philosophers who work on the nature of love differ over its defining features. But suppose that whether love is best characterized as a sort of union, a commitment, an emotion, or a desire of a particular sort, it at least essentially involves concern for the well-being or flourishing of the object of love. In his work on love, Harry Frankfurt (1999, 165) adds that the lover's concern for the beloved is disinterested, in the sense that the good of the beloved is desired for its own sake, rather

9 The Westminster Confession of Faith (II.1) states: "There is but one . . . true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions. . . ."

than for the sake of promoting any other interests. Frankfurt emphasizes that lovers are not merely concerned for the interests of their beloveds; further, they identify the interests of the beloveds as their own (Frankfurt 1999, 168). He suggests that if the lover “comes to believe that his beloved is not flourishing, then it is unavoidable that this causes him harm” (Frankfurt 1999, 170). Lack of flourishing in the beloved, by the nature of love, causes harm in the one who loves her.

If love of someone essentially involves concern for her well-being, then it is reasonable to think that it involves disvaluing or having concerned disapproval for her harm. Now we might wonder whether disvaluing or having concerned disapproval for the beloved’s harm implies experiencing sorrow or grief when the beloved is harmed. Taliaferro (1989, 220) suggests that “God cares about our failures, and this concerned disapproval may rightly be counted as an instance of sorrow.” Consider, for instance, the horror of someone you love being raped. Taliaferro writes: “Part of what it means to be sorrowful here is that you do disapprove of it, the harming of someone who matters to you, and you disapprove of this profoundly” (Taliaferro 1989, 220). It seems to me that, to say that I love my daughter, yet that I experience no sorrow, grief, or passion of any kind at her pain or disgrace, stretches the concept of love beyond comprehensibility. Likewise, if a husband remains wholly emotionally distant and undisturbed in the presence of his wife’s severe pain, it seems that he does not love her or at least that there is something defective about his love. Hence, it would seem that a being who is more loving than any of us, who is the most loving that anyone can be, would experience profound sadness at the harm that befalls those who are loved. God is supposed to love all of his created beings. Moreover, since one can love something only insofar as one is acquainted with it, it would seem that God could not love us fully without knowing us fully. But our being fully known requires acquaintance on the part of the knower with our suffering.<sup>10</sup> Thus, reflection on the nature of love supports the conception of a God who suffers.

Additional support for the passibility of God comes from the consideration of the nature of goodness. It seems natural and plausible to think that a morally good being grieves over evil. In his extended defense of the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility, Richard Creel (1986) argues that it serves no purpose to attribute suffering to God, as God may act out of justice without being sorrowful. But to the contrary, we question the goodness of an agent who acts in a morally correct manner toward victims of crime or disease, yet wholly without sorrow or empathy for the persons served. A great moral character – one worthy of worship – exhibits its greatness in part by what it sorrows over and to what degree. Noble sorrow at witnessing a tragic occurrence is a good. Hence, it would seem that God’s goodness implies sorrow, as well as joy, over the world. This sorrow is arguably not a defect, but a perfection, a strength, or an asset, an aspect of being supremely good.

I have suggested that there is some reason to think that God does suffer, provided by reflection on the natures of goodness and love. Should the considerations in favor of the attribute of impassibility prove in the end more powerful, however, the divine intimacy theodicy is not thereby defeated. There remains the possibility that God shows himself to a human sufferer in a unique way, even if there is no divine suffering. Furthermore, if suffering cannot experience like that of God Himself, Christian theism, in particular, can yet make sense of it as experience shared with the person of Jesus Christ. Thus Christian theism

10 Cf. Wolterstorff (1988, 223).

has perhaps some unique resources for responding to the problem of evil. It can, for instance, count certain occasions of suffering as avenues to divine intimacy by way of sympathetic identification with one of the persons of the Holy Trinity: God incarnate.

## Problems for the Divine Intimacy Theodicy

### *The objection from cruelty*

One difficulty for the divine intimacy theodicy is an objection from cruelty. The objection is that it is implausible to think that a loving God would permit suffering as a means to knowing him. Why would such nastiness be preferable to direct divine self-revelation? Imagine a parent who installed no child safety gates or devices in the home, allowing a young toddler to simply tumble down the stairs, so that the child would run to the parent for comfort or would somehow allegedly “understand” the parent’s own pain. A parent who behaved in such a way would not be good. A good parent shows herself to her child directly, with words and gestures of kindness and love. Since permitting suffering is a cruel way of fostering intimacy, the objection goes, the perfect being would not be justified in this permission and so the account of suffering as religious experience fails as a partial theodicy.

This is a troubling objection. Of course, it is problematic to envision God as allowing us to suffer for his own good – such as the benefit of receiving our attention and the sense of power deriving from our dependence on him – rather than for our own good. And it is disturbing to conceive of God as taking this attitude toward created beings: “Suffer, and then I will let you know Me,” as if our enduring a crucible of suffering were a passkey, while God looks on in malicious delight. But these images inaccurately reflect the divine intimacy theodicy. A perfect being would not need for us in any way to give him “a sense of power” and would not delight over suffering. The suggestion I have explored is that, perhaps, some occasions of suffering enable certain individuals’ coming to love of and intimacy with God. The objector might counter by pointing out that some persons experience God in moments of great joy and beauty. Yet this may be true while it is also true that other persons’ paths to God are paths through suffering.<sup>11</sup> And it may be that the good thereby achieved could not be achieved in any other way, namely, the profound good of intimacy with a loving and suffering God.

The objector might be concerned with the question of why God would not simply make himself known at all times, to everyone. One line of response is that for God to directly, constantly, and obviously manifest his presence would be coercive; it might be that his remaining somewhat hidden preserves our independence of thought and action.<sup>12</sup> And suffering may be for some persons the most effective, noncoercive means to achieving the end of love of and intimacy with God. A different response is that through suffering, a person may gain a type of knowledge of God that simply could not be had by way of a conversation with God or a visual experience of him.

11 Cf. Eleonore Stump (1994, 1999).

12 Murray (1993).

### *The objection from lunacy*

A second objection is this: to view suffering as an avenue to knowledge of God is evidence of a personality disturbance or psychological disorder. Put bluntly, only a lunatic would welcome suffering and find it gratifying in virtue of its alleged spiritual dimensions. This line of objection gains support from record of the physical conditions of the lives of some Christian mystics of the medieval and later periods who viewed suffering in this manner. For instance, the Cistercian nun Beatrice of Nazareth, the author of *The Seven Manners of Love*, is reported to have deprived herself of nourishing food, worn uncomfortable garments, scourged herself, and slept on thorns.<sup>13</sup>

Other religious believers may strike us as histrionic and objectionably passive in their welcoming attitudes toward suffering. Consider, for instance, the remarks of Therese of Lisieux at the onset of symptoms of tuberculosis, which took her life at the age of 24:

Oh! how sweet this memory really is! After remaining at the Tomb until midnight, I returned to our cell, but I had scarcely laid my head upon the pillow when I felt something like a bubbling stream mounting to my lips. I didn't know what it was, but I thought that perhaps I was going to die and my soul was flooded with joy. However, as our lamp was extinguished, I told myself I would have to wait until the morning to be certain of my good fortune, for it seemed to me that it was blood I had coughed up. The morning was not long in coming; upon awakening, I thought immediately of the joyful thing that I had to learn, and so I went over to the window. I was able to see that I was not mistaken. Ah! my soul was filled with a great consolation; I was interiorly persuaded that Jesus, on the anniversary of His own death, wanted to have me hear His first call. It was like a sweet and distant murmur that announced the Bridegroom's arrival. (Therese of Lisieux [1898] 1969, 210–211)

Therese not only notices the blood in her cough, but she welcomes and embraces it as the answer to her prayer. She has prayed that God would consume her with His love and bring her to Himself quickly, and she has asked that she be allowed to share in the suffering of Christ. She declares in her "Act of Oblation to Merciful Love":

I thank You, O my God! for all the graces You have granted me, especially the grace of making me pass through the crucible of suffering. It is with joy I shall contemplate You on the Last Day carrying the scepter of Your Cross. Since You deigned to give me a share in this very precious Cross, I hope in heaven to resemble You and to see shining in my glorified body the sacred stigmata of Your Passion. (Therese of Lisieux [1898] 1969, 210)

Reading passages such as these may leave the impression that it is, at best, wishful thinking and, at worst, indicative of a psychiatric condition, to believe that God is providing intimacy with Himself through one's suffering.

I agree that there is room for explanations of such reported visions and feelings of gratitude in wish fulfillment and other psychological needs. These explanations, however, leave room for there being genuine contact with a divine being. And of course those who report experience of supernatural phenomena are notoriously subject to the charge of being delusional. Which views indicate spiritual insight and which indicate a condition in

13 Brunn and Epiney-Burgard (1989, 72).



need of medical or psychological treatment is a matter of opinion (and the two are not incompatible). As it stands, the objection from lunacy amounts to little more than the claim that it seems to the objector that the proposed view is crazy or, in other words, false.

The objector might develop his case by pointing to such factors as social isolation, inadequate sleep, poor nutrition, and lack of medical care in the lives of some religious mystics who have claimed to perceive God or to have come better to understand God in the midst of their own suffering. These circumstances, it may be argued, indicate that the view of suffering as religious experience is pathological and not reasonable. Yet surely these considerations are inconclusive. Recall C.D. Broad's (1939, 164) remark that a person "might need to be slightly 'cracked' in order to have some peep-holes into the super-sensible world." Sometimes, quite remarkable abilities are, in fact, accompanied by disorders in other areas. Some savants, for instance, have remarkable mathematical proficiencies while being deficient socially and in other areas, and there is a striking disproportionate regularity with which the triad of blindness, mental handicap, and musical genius occurs in savant syndrome. Additionally, difficult living conditions might in fact facilitate spiritual insight. Furthermore, a charge of insanity against every adherent to a divine intimacy theodicy is grandiose.

A stronger version of the lunacy objection is as follows. Consider this line of reasoning: Intimacy with God is perhaps the most important good that I can have in this life. But I cannot achieve that intimacy without undergoing some suffering. Since God has not blessed me with suffering, I will chop off two of my toes and then punch myself in the face.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps only a lunatic would take this line of reasoning seriously. But at first glance, it may seem that a supporter of the divine intimacy theodicy is committed to approving of it. Similarly, one might object that the theodicy leads to a weakened sense of duty to relieve the physical suffering of others and even gives license actively to make them suffer, in order that they might achieve the spiritual good of closeness to God; it is an instance of lunacy to endorse a view with such implications.

However, the proponent of the divine intimacy theodicy is not committed to condoning either moral complacency or the intentional pursuit of suffering. Adopting the proposed theodicy need not lead one to self-mutilation or to other eccentric or damaging behaviors. In fact, it should not do so for anyone who takes seriously a moral imperative to care for the sick, the poor, the hungry, and those in pain, as well as a moral duty to look after our own bodily health. These moral duties might be grounded in divine command or in a number of other ways. The divine intimacy theodicy does not direct withholding material and emotional aid to those in need, and it does not entail that it is permissible to actively persecute and oppress others so as to drive them closer to God. The proposed theodicy is consistent with a divine mandate to alleviate suffering whenever this is within our power, as well as with a mandate not to inflict pain upon oneself or upon others.

### *The objection from ineffectiveness*

A third objection is one from futility or ineffectiveness. Common reactions to suffering include confusion, bitterness, and rejection of God's existence, rather than a sense of closeness

14 This is Chris Tucker's vivid way of expressing the problem.

to God. Suffering is easily interpreted as evidence that God does not exist or perhaps is there but does not care about the sufferer.

Of course it is true that sometimes, when we are ill or sad or devastated by loss, we feel utterly alone. It may feel as if no one understands, no one cares, and the future holds only the same aloneness and absurdity. However, with suffering, it is not always this way. Not all instances of despair and loss are futile with respect to yielding closeness with God. In other words, first, the divine intimacy theodicy is not designed to apply to all cases of suffering. Second, from the fact that some persons reject the existence of God on the basis of suffering, it does not follow that some occasions of suffering do not provide an opportunity for intimacy with God.<sup>15</sup> Analogously, from the fact that some husbands do not become more intimate with their loving and caring spouses, it does not follow that none do, and it does not follow that those who do not were not provided with an opportunity to do so.<sup>16</sup> God could be present and available to support a person who chooses not to acknowledge that this is so. It is also the case that one might be sharing in the experience of God who suffers as one does, without one's being appreciative of this fact. The thesis at issue is not that meaning is always found in suffering by everyone who suffers, but rather that a certain kind of meaning can be found in suffering, through divine intimacy.

## Conclusion

It may be that a full accounting of the suffering in the world within a theistic framework, or within a Christian one in particular, is something we simply cannot attain. Furthermore, one might charge that it is unfeeling, and perhaps even pathetic, to attempt to set out lines of supposedly justificatory reasoning in the face of unspeakable tragedies and suboptimal design. I can only say that the concern is understandable and that, again, I offer what I have set out here simply as one line of thought that is worthy of further reflection and that has seemed to play an important role in the thinking of some Christians past and present. The suggestion has been that some cases of suffering may be viewed as experiences that can bring a person closer to God, such that the good either in or resulting from them is intimacy with the divine agent.

The divine intimacy theodicy is useful not only in that it may provide a partial justificatory account but also in that it suggests means by which we might cope when we suffer ourselves. In fact, one might worry that what I have said here engages not with the philosophical version of the problem of evil at all, but rather with what has been called the psychological, personal, or existential version of it. It seems to me, though, that if one is a philosopher and, indeed, if one is a reflective person of any sort who is concerned about such things, then any theodicy is, in a way, practically suggestive: it helps us to cope intellectually, to think about and to process what goes wrong. And it is true that the account of suffering as religious experience suggests a means of dealing with the existential problem

15 Victor Frankl (1959), in *Man's Search for Meaning*, emphasizes individual choice in his account of how we can make our lives meaningful despite unavoidable suffering. He suggests that we do this by taking responsibility for our lives, setting goals and working toward them, and by choosing to find meaning in love, beauty, and serving something larger than ourselves. His message is not, however, that suffering is a means to attaining some kind of special knowledge of, or closeness with, a divine being.

16 Thanks to Chris Tucker for this analogy.

of evil. One way of enduring unchangeable occasions of pain and suffering is to adopt an attitude of acceptance and even, perhaps strangely, gratification in the opportunity to identify with God.

Consider how this might work, in particular, for a Christian theist. Take an instance of physical suffering, say, malfunction of the gallbladder, which many women experience during pregnancy and which causes intense sharp pain under the right side of the ribcage. The person of Jesus of Nazareth might never have suffered physical pain with this particular source. Nonetheless, in the midst of coping with it, a person might hold in mind similar pain that Jesus suffered in the events leading up to his crucifixion, taking comfort in the sympathetic identification and using it as a source of strength to bolster her endurance. Likewise, in the midst of dealing with the trauma of a deep betrayal of loyalty, one might bring to mind the thought that, as I have been rejected, so, too, was Christ rejected, even by Peter, his closest friend. In enduring such occasions of pain and loss, a person might be able to understand in an experiential way aspects of the life of Christ that perhaps not all others fully do or can.

## Acknowledgments

For helpful comments on an earlier draft, I am grateful to an audience at Virginia Commonwealth University, particularly Donald Smith, Catherine Sutton, and Gene Mills, and also to Neal Tognazzini, Doug Moore, and Chris Tucker.

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# Toward an Indian Theodicy

PURUSHOTTAMA BILIMORIA

It is a common practice in Western philosophy to characterize as *theodicy* certain defensive responses to the so-called Problem of Evil – namely, why a supremely divine, perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing being (who we call “God” or the Transcendent) would, in fact, be justified in allowing vast amounts and variety of evil, horrendously prevalent, in our world. In more precise terms, theodicy seeks to provide responses to the evidential problem of evil by affording a moral justification for the character (properties such as goodness), and the actions or omissions, on the part of such a benevolent being, in terms of some morally sufficient reason for there to be such and so much evil around. Although it is more a purview of a natural theistic response, theodicy may also address the conundrum of the *logical inconsistency* between the presence of evil in our world and belief in a monotheistic God (Rowe 2007) (see Chapter 2).

In non-Western traditions, the distinction between the logical and the evidential is not given due attention as in Western debates, following St Augustine, until recently. Thus, the time-honored question, “Isn’t it inconsistent that a perfectly benevolent and omnipotent God would create evil, especially one that he cannot control or eliminate to the point of compromising certain of his ascribed properties, if not his very existence?” frays into the otherwise distinguishable questions, “Is there some justification for why God would allow such horrendous proportions of evil as evidently suffered in our world? What is on his mind? Is he guided by a higher purpose or an invisible good for his creatures, in the shorter or longer run? Or is there no justification for this universal injustice, and the blame is rightly heaved on God’s callousness?”

This chapter will focus on non-Western, particularly Indian, justifications for why God would allow evils in our world. Where the principle of *karma* is introduced arguably to provide a supplement to the theistic (and nontheistic) response, some different questions will doubtless arise (such as the role of the individual and freely willed choices against the grain of accrued *karma*). Some have argued that this latter discursive intervention is a unique attempt within Indian theodicy to solve – albeit, from another perspective,

dissolve – the benighted problem of evil (Matilal 1992). This insightful suggestion will be examined for its ramifications toward the contemporary debate. That said, as will be evident, there is neither firm unanimity in the classical literature nor absence of skepticism by modern Indian thinkers on the success of any attempted Indian theodicy.

Since the theistic response we are interested in occurs within the Hindu tradition, we shall proceed with major Hindu responses to the problem of evil, and consider objections from nontheistic systems. (The designations “Hindu” and “Indian” will be interchangeably used, unless specific references are made to Buddhist and Jain systems.)

There are two major constraints to be noted at the outset. First, while generally taken to be a “natural theistic” tradition, Hindu theology is not always clear on what this might mean, for there never was an unwavering commitment to a monotheistically conceived deity – though there are cognate conceptions and close parallels to a supreme personal deity (Bilimoria 1990; Reigle 2003). Thus, unlike the Abrahamic traditions where responses to the problem of evil take a more determinate form, the centrality of God as the one on whom the onus rests to justify his existence and nature against the ubiquitous presence of evil in our world, is somewhat diffused. Instead, this transcendent space is populated by a myriad of competing or complementing deities (we may call *gods*). In the pantheon, the supreme (personal) divinity is a cosmic facilitator, not unlike Plato’s Demiurge; or alternatively a transcendently signified Absolute is conceived in such abstract and impersonal (i.e., detached, noncreational, and amoral) terms that it makes little sense to pose the question of moral responsibility in the absence of divine intentionality – as Hegel indeed complained (Bilimoria 2010).

Second, Indian theologians and philosophers have seen it fit to introduce certain “inherent” principles – notably of *karma* and, aligned to it, *dharma* – that function both ontologically and heuristically, to mitigate the theoretical damage that the problem of evil might direct at omni-God (where such a transcendent being is admitted, and religiously espoused in popular Hinduism). The latter move echoes certain analogues in Western theodicy, such as Augustine’s suggestion of *privation*, free-will thesis, compatibilism, and compossibility; although upon analysis, the analogies falter, and we are behooved to appraise the Hindu position within the context of its own premises internal to that system (Clooney 1989). However, as David Shatz correctly notes in his essay in this volume, “the religious authenticity of a given solution does not guarantee immunity from assessment from a standpoint external to the religion” (see Chapter 21). He adds a cautionary note: “On the other hand, someone who objects to a given theodicy cannot wander so far from the theist’s proffered theodicy that the critic is really attacking central beliefs of a religion on some grounds other than the existence of evil.”

Two consequences follow – as articulated by Bruce Reichenbach (1998, 249). First, the problem of evil in Indian philosophical traditions rests not so much on the question of the existence and nature of God, as it does on the question whether there is universal justice. The fact is that that the problem of evil in a theological guise (i.e., with reference to God) is rarely treated directly in classical or medieval Indian literature. What this means, in effect, is that the question of the relation of God to pain, suffering, and dysfunction is much less significant in Indian *karmic* systems. And the reason has to do not so much with the laws of *karma* as with their respective views of God or the supremely divine.

Second, there is not a great degree of variation to the way the problem is conceived – as distinct from their respective responses – between theistic and nontheistic systems. Thus, the Jain, Buddhist, Hindu Mīmāṃsā schools on the nontheistic side may find themselves

in good company with theistic Vedānta. As Reichenbach (1998, 249) puts it: “Both (sides) want to understand why it is that persons experience pain and pleasure, fortune and misfortune in ways that seem unconnected with the moral quality of their present actions, and ultimately, how this cycle of suffering can be escaped.”

To appreciate more fully the foregoing remarks, we have to examine in some depth the specific role that the principle of *karma* is perceived to play in accounting for evil – as well as its likely rectification – and how this intermediating principle is intended to deflect the burden of moral responsibility away from God to the principal bearers of *karma*. All Indian explanatory accounts, nontheistic and theistic, invariably involve or invoke *karma* as part of the solution. In their seemingly “weakly particularist” thesis, Hindu theodicy implicates the inexorable principle of *karma* as a procedural process that God relies upon to dispense and maintain justice – moral just order – in the universe. This might place “limits” on God’s nature, and hence one may be tempted to classify Hindu theodicy as “*maverick*.” But we shall argue otherwise.

## The Psychology of *Karma*

So what is *karma*? The term *karman* is a noun derived from the root *kr*. “do-, act-, make-, perform-, accomplish-,” it may signify a simple action or deed, but it can also imply reference to the causal antecedents, as well the consequent effects or results of the action in a seamless temporal or spatial horizon. The doctrine has it that every action leaves behind invisible residues in the psyche of the individual. Accumulation of these traces constellate as *kleśas* (dormant triggers) to generate latent dispositions (*vāsanās*) toward a potential action and habit formation. These potentiate take root in the psyche and in due course of time determine or rather *moderate* the individual’s actions, perceptions, and responses to the environment. Virtuous acts led to pleasant results – such is the effect of “good” *karma*, while unvirtuous acts may lead to unpleasant or painful results – such is the effect of “bad” *karma*. The accumulated residual *karma* of the past begin to “ripen” or bear fruition presently, that is, begin to manifest outcomes in the duration of a particular life, and thereby impact on the individual’s physical, social, and spiritual conditions or circumstances, broadly speaking, or they may be deferred and get liquidated at some future time – to which the person’s future *karma* may be added. The burden of the unexhausted *karma* is what helps perpetuate the chain of seamless continuity of an individual’s cyclical existence, and creates conditions for good life, life of suffering, good death or bad rebirth, and so on. Such are the retributions portended in the causal network that in itself is said to be an inexorable manifestation of the moral law of nature.<sup>1</sup> There are strong readings and weak readings of the impact of *karma* on life’s suffering and the evils experienced; some border rigidly on deterministic claims, others veer toward libertarian claims, allowing free will to moderate the choice between potential courses of action presented by the agent’s ripening *karma*. (We shall revisit the complexities when considering various philosophical objections raised against these claims, within the discourse of theodicy, since the extensive debate on the cogency of *karma* as an ethical doctrine *per se* is not our primary concern here).

1 We shall not pause to examine the claim that *karma* must necessarily entail afterlife, much less rebirth, which have been critically treated elsewhere (Kaufman 2005; Chadha and Trakakis 2007).



In simpler terms, *karma* is described as the principle of universal causality resulting from actions. Every meritorious and virtuous deed, and every negative act, leaves its impression or “trace” on the psyche, which in turn moulds the character of the persons as well as their *disposition* toward behaving in certain way or ways, with a degree of latitude and mitigating factors (contributed by specific circumstances, and the person’s own attachments, desires, conscience, intentions, and judgment in the situation). The ethical implication is that whatever good or bad one performs, one must reap their results: good deeds lead to happiness, bad deeds lead to suffering.<sup>2</sup> *The retributive results are proportionate to the gravity of the act.* To guard against an excessively fatalistic reading of the doctrine, one could argue that there is no reason why, according to this theory, some person’s greed and avarice born of attachments could not lead them to enjoy fortune or cause unwanted misfortune and pain or loss to others (due not to their own *karma* to so suffer). Persons who were cheated might never recover their loss in kind, but would nonetheless be owed something by their accomplice, which the inexorable laws of *karma* will take care of in their own inimitable way.

What this means is that actions generate their own, intrinsic moral consequences, however benign or otherwise the agent’s intentions. Certain acts may violate general or universal principles, such as fair entitlements, deserts, or rights of another (e.g., discriminating on grounds of gender or race), and one’s responsibility to oneself and others. Also, certain acts lead to irreparable and irreversible damage, such that the agent must bear responsibility for the consequences of the acts, the burden of which must surely pass over to the moral sphere. In other words, actions may be rightly judged in respect of rules they violate, or the consequences they lead to, or in respect of the act *qua* act on the premise that certain acts are intrinsically and inherently wrong, bad, or undesirable.

The same ethical considerations apply to *karma*. Telling the truth on the principle that one only ever utters the truth (e.g., through testimony, or disclosure of the flight path of his prey to a bandit) in a situation that one knows will lead to the wrongful killing of an otherwise innocent victim, will incur the testifier the wrath of *karma*. The prosecutor’s legal charges brought to the court of law may be mitigated against him, and he may be pardoned with the intervention of the state even after sentencing by the judge; so might the resulting suffering be minimized through the merciful intervention of a deity, an enlightened guru, or through penitence or repentance; but the *moral* burden of the each act rests squarely on the shoulder of the individual rather than be left as a matter for judgment or adjudication, or pardon, by an external (human or divinely) punitive or be it benign agency. One might argue that the *karma* theory, while it is deterministic in respect of the *moral* content as a consequence of the person’s past or current conduct, it is not rigidly so in respect of the outcomes and consequent actions the person may or may not choose to perform or consider as the best available options. These considerations become part of the *dharma* deliberations – that is, proper rites, others’ rights or deserts, normative rules, technical knowledge, shedding attachments, and so on, and universal moral constraints, such as killing another. *Karma* is the antecedent, and is not isomorphic with the consequent; they are indeed relationally connected, and there is a “flow-over” effect; however, the exact proportionality is not given in any clear formulaic equation that any theorist could spell out without limitations (*contra* Kaufman 2005). The application of the

law may extend beyond the individual person to groups and even nations as well, as the great epic *Mahābhārata* amply illustrates in its complex ethical ruminations. Hence, the debate that raged between the dialogists as to whether war – that one side vengefully insisted upon – was a direct consequence of the *karma* of the competing clan, or whether due attention to *dharma* – that the other side ponderously appealed to – could have averted the ensuing carnage.

Now here is one ramification of the foregoing for possible universalist theodicy: the doctrine of *karma* could render God superfluous and exonerate him from being implicated in any way in the functioning of the world, and hence also on the moral front where the challenge of the prevalence of evil is registered. However, the matter is not as simple, or simply traded off in the tradition; rather, on the converse side, the inexplicable efficacy of *karma* is invoked, in one system we shall consider, as lending evidence both to the existence of God (the serendipitous mystery of the problem of evil), and also to his supreme goodness! The doctrine, while it might seem to exacerbate the philosophical problem, also appears to provide strength and cements the nexus between God and evil, good and bad, without compromising the moral stakes on which classical (Western) theodicy would stand or fall.

We may note also that the *karma* theory is not intended to explain the origins or beginnings of the cycle of births and rebirths, nor serve as a *complete* and *systematic* explanation of human suffering. Rather, “the karma theorist wishes to reflect our ignorance in the face of the complexity of reality by offering only a sketchy account as to why humans suffer, one that is based on the unargued assumption that the universe is ultimately just” – or God is just (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, 514). Various accounts attempt to fill in the gaps and details, though unsatisfactorily, on the inner workings or mechanics of the *karmic* process. The concern in theodicy is not to get bogged down on these details and lacks, but rather to find an explanatory solution to the problem of evil and, as it were, save God from the charges from the nontheists of corruption, compromise, and possible malevolence (Bilimoria 2007a). We turn now to reflections on theodicy proper, beginning with one of the two schools of Indian philosophical theology we will be examining here.

## Nyāya School of Logic and Theism

Better known for its extensive contributions to the rigors of classical Indian logic, grammar, and epistemology, the school of Nyāya in time (with the major commentators, from Vātsyāyana circa 350–450 CE onwards) some have argued, culminates in logical theism (Vattanky 1993). The school came to be associated with both moves within the tradition, namely, mounting a rational argument for the existence of the supremely divine being *Īśvara* (a nomenclature taken to be the Sanskrit cognate for “God”, used interchangeably) and defending *Īśvara* against the attacks of their adversaries (monists and nontheists) on his apparently poor record and performance in the face of the enormity of suffering and evil experienced by sentient beings.

The Nyāya work up the most sophisticated argument to date in the Indian tradition for the existence of God – described often as bearing on “cosmo-teleological inferential proofs” (Bilimoria 2011, 664). Our interest presently is not with this argument as such, nor with the robustness of the logical analyses and evidence of a complicated ontology developed over 1200 years, but rather with the issue of how God’s goodness and other benign properties

fare within the discourse when confronted with the ubiquitous problem of evil. In terms of *Īśvara's* properties, he is said to possess certain divine qualities that include being an intelligent agent/maker (*buddhismat-kartṛ*), single/unitary (*eka*), omni-extended (*vibhu*), omniscient (*sarvavid*), omnipotent (*sarvaśakti*), and timeless (*śāśvat*). He does not possess or exercise the property of creating the world in the way that the Abrahamic traditions (*ā la* the Genesis), and later Vedānta schools, would ascribe to the supreme divine being of which there is no greater. He is at best an efficient cause and not a material cause of the universe, and this fact is demonstrated through a set of inferences from the world to the existence of a first cause or necessary being. The “proof” (which would not get past Kant’s critical gaze) in a nutshell reads something like the following: “Because the world has an apparent design – that is, it appears to be an artefact – there must be an intelligent designer who made it.”

Hence, on the cosmological front, *Īśvara*, not unlike the potter, does not produce the universe *ab initio* (much less, out of nothingness); rather, he fully depends on prior materials (preexisting constituents of dyads–triads of atoms, geometric forms, and remnant banks of *karma* from the previous collapse of the universe). Third, much like the demiurge, exercising his omni-will, the cosmic architect fashions minor deities and other divinely endowed beings who might be entrusted with the task of threading together inert atoms and properties, and even to provide support for an upright and operative cosmos. This is not a case of “creationism” as such; but still one would expect God to be in full control over his dominion. One may dispense with the property of creating the world *ab initio*, out of nothing; however, if the properties of omnipotence and goodness are to be maintained, then the fact of evil, or gratuitous suffering for that matter, poses the same problem as it does in any account that includes a monotheistic deity.

And so the question arises: Why is there such vast amounts of evil and suffering, especially if God in his merciful wisdom could have fine-tuned and “fashioned” or constructed a much better universe after correcting the defects and deficiencies in each prior world-state, one that comes cleansed of evil and its sorrowful consequences? In defense, the Nyāya response is standardly that God through his omniscient state oversees the operation of *karma*, which is binding on all selves except God’s self, and through his yogic (“supranatural”) powers dispenses rewards and punishments on the basis of the agent’s or collective’s stock of merits and demerits.

At the same time, the almighty relies on human efforts (as well as on the middling gods, the natural orderliness of planets, other creatures, and ecosystems in our world) toward regulating the cosmos. At the end of the day, compassion does mark God’s intentions, even in the face of natural calamities and misfortunes that may or may not be caused by an agent’s previous *karma*; God, though, is not responsible for these. God’s compassion also has its limitations, for he is respectful of the laws of *karma* and leaves people to work off their *karma* in ways most appropriate and conducive for their salvific future. The soteriological end for which the world could be said to have been created – that is, ultimate good and salvation for all human beings if not all sentient creatures (gods and animals alike) – seems to be sparsely hinged onto the cosmological design of the universe (as paradoxical as this may sound). So nothing like the Western religious concept of providence features in this account, because there is neither a full-scale creation, nor a very decisive teleology, nor any sense of a continuous presence of the divine *Geist* throughout history; he is not a fellow sufferer with human beings, much less with other “lowly” creatures (Chatterjee 1997, 325). In other words, God relies on a preexisting set of conditions that were

then put in place at the time of creation, including *dharma*, right order or law, and *karma*, the root trigger of evil in the world, which is governed by its own inexorable laws. For this reason, God does not intervene; but the overall cosmic design ensures that the ultimate good can still be striven for and attained, *ceteris paribus*. The cogency of this argument is of course questionable: it is not clear why God does not intervene if he desires the best (*niḥśreya*) for all sentient beings? Suppose the cumulative *karma* perpetuates itself seamlessly and individuals under the veil of their own ignorance fail defeasibly to heed to the edicts of *dharma*, and so no one reaches the soteriological end or liberation. That ultimate good is forfeited, and evil reigns supreme – until the end time, after which another cycle returns, and so on, *ad infinitum*, like a cosmic circus. Does God just sit back and let it be? That would be rather callous of him, and not a fitting tribute to his omnipotence and benevolence.

There are further questions raised by the Mīmāṃsā philosophers, very much in the spirit of, or anticipating, the Humean critique (Bilimoria 1990). They point to the imperfections of the world and ask whether God might have botched up the job, and that he might therefore be an inefficient designer, as well as morally callous, indifferent, and lacking in compassion. Moreover, why does the huge amount of bad *karma* that abounds in the world not bring blemish upon God's nature? Is he really in control? In other words, if God is omnipotent, then he should be able to eliminate all evil accruing from *karma* by mitigating the residual traces of all acts. If he is omniscient, he would know each individual's *karma* (which he probably does when he puts his mind to it) and the suffering this will likely bring about; but in his infinite wisdom, he should also be able to guide the individual toward a safer recourse or rescue from the deleterious consequence of the prior *karma*-effected disposition.

The short answer to these questions, usually, is that human effort can both be culpable and efficacious toward countering the pitiable travails of existence: *that* indeed is the hidden hand of *karmic* laws. It also means that being thus free to choose, human beings are not pawns in the hands of a superior power. But still, would there not be greater justice possible if God, who is said to be good by virtue of his nature (not just by some arbitrary fiat), actually did intervene rather than simply allow the brute, impersonal operations of *karma* to determine certain specific outcomes? Besides, do all instances of good *karma* get rewarded equally and fairly, or is some favoritism involved, particularly where God is moved to respond to the obsequious prayers and supplications of some, but chooses to ignore those of the infidels or the unrepentant? Is he, in his infinite resignation, incapable of allowing another chance, or transmuting or even transferring *karma* elsewhere, or offering some rehabilitative dispensation rather than be hamstrung by a rigidly impersonal retributive justice automaton? Human beings complain about the uneven calculus – amounting to starkly universal injustice.

Nor does the justificatory paradigm based on *karma* account for the presence of natural evil. Are earthquakes, tsunamis, bushfires, hurricanes, and other devastating natural turbulences of necessity casually linked to people's *karma*, especially that of the hundreds and thousands of victims, particularly innocent children, animals, and plant life, affected by such disasters? What have the latter done to deserve this ignominy? Would not a personal judge who has compassion and empathy be better placed to make adjustments, avert such disasters which he in his omniscient mind should be able to foresee coming? Or, alternatively would he not desire to compensate the victim, even of a culprit who has behaved heinously, on the basis of their prior good *karmas* and felicitous track-records, and so on?

Is it a moral imperative to accumulate good *karma* or merely a prudential decree? This question is asked because there are clearly set moral consequences when it comes to accruing bad *karma*, which appears not to be so with respect to good *karmas*, and therefore the respective consequences are calculated differentially between proscribed bad acts and prudentially good acts. Just as, for example, in some human social and filial practices, a perceived misdemeanor or egregious conduct may be gravely admonished and indeed punished rather harshly, especially if remorse and expiatory atonement are not evinced in the culpable agent, or there is threat of potential recurrence, such that all prior good deeds and virtues of the agent may forever remain unacknowledged and unrewarded (which is why, in modern secular India, capital punishment has been abolished in most states). So there just is not a proportionate balance conceptually and ontologically between the planks of good and bad *karmas*; the supposed symmetry between “reward” and “punishment” is entirely misplaced, such that the former may afford one “an orange for Christmas” (as in Ray Charles’ experience) but the latter could well sentence him to capital punishment, that is, death (Kaufman 2005, 21). Is then the theory of *karma* aligned with God as an available but too often inaccessible moderator an unexemplary model for divine justice? And if God does or can intervene or interfere with the operation of the laws of *karma*, does it mean there could be something unjust – not quite right – in the operation of *karma* (hence, *karmic* injustice)? Perhaps an impersonal law is neither just nor unjust – it does what it is as it were programmed to do, regardless (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, 541). But if it cannot be mitigated either by God or human free will to a large extent, then it is a case of *hard determinism*. A theodicy for *karma* is not at stake, for as argued, left to its own devices, *karma* theory does allow for assuaging the moral burden in less deterministic or fatalistic terms than often imagined; but since a God is involved and he is supposed to be essentially good and yet there is evil, the Nyāya theodicy runs into a few problems.<sup>3</sup>

## The Vedānta Theodicy

We turn now to the Vedānta for even more nuanced responses to the problem of evil, and rectifications of issues left-over from Nyāya theodicy.

One Bādarāyaṇa (5 CE) is attributed with the founding of Vedānta thought; in his *Brahmasūtras* (BS), he establishes the metaphysical primacy of *Brahman* as the absolute, transcendental reality, over and above all beings and things of the empirical world – but which from a higher perspective may well be “not-different” from his divine nature. Functionally, *Brahman* is attributed with the same creative role as *Īśvara* (as the Good Lord; the isomorphism however is more tensed in later developments, as we shall see). While supposing that *Brahman* is the source of the world, he raises a problem for theodicy, on the reasoning that there is inequality in the dispensation of good and evil, and a certain cruelty because the Lord periodically destroys the world. The protagonist of the Advaita (“nondu-

3 I have eschewed going into further historical developments in Nyāya where more fortified arguments for the existence of God (in the face of evil in the world) were harnessed (from Udayana, eleventh century to Gaṅgeśa, fourteenth century). There were gallant attempt to shield orthodox beliefs from misperceived theodicy and criticisms (that had been) brandished by Indian nontheists (Buddhists and Jains) and Hindu agnostics (Mīmāṃsā, Yoga-Sāṃkhya). For which see Vattanky (1993) and Patil (2009).

alist”) school of Vedānta, Ādi Śaṅkara (788–820 CE) defends Bādarāyaṇa’s realist position, in his commentary, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (2.1.34), (Śaṅkara 1962), arguing that the reproach of iniquitous dispensation and malevolence is misplaced “because He is bound by regards.” That is to say, God looks to the extant merits and demerits of beings in generating the successive templates for creation. And so he is not at fault and bears no blame for the ensuing inequality, and so on.

Śaṅkara is adamant that creation is “*sāpekṣa*,” that is, *Brahman* is not independent, even though he is the sole material cause of the world. As a matter of fact, he does not have nor can exercise free choice, since he has no control over dispensing the consequences of creatures’ actions, in which he is guided by the “Force of Law” – *Karma*. But as with digging holes to sink the sacrificial or foundational posts, the ground has to be proportionality measured out depending on the lay of the land, and the work is accordingly supervised. Śaṅkara (1962) adds another dimension to the causality of God: “like a cloud.”

Rainfall is the common cause for the production of grains and plants. Unlike Monsanto, rainfall is not partial to one over the other among the diverse variety of species that are produced, for each comes with its own *potentia*. The Lord is impassionate. The varieties and inequalities of the creatures are due to the Lord’s dependence upon the special factor in each case, namely, the particular nature of the creature, which is usually determined by the prior work or the accumulated *karma* of the creature. It is clear though that God’s dependence upon the *karma* of the creatures, seriously delimits, that is, restricts, God’s omnipotence; second, it takes away any element of the hand or even the inscrutability of providence: grace would not be easy to come by in this account. Thus, Vedānta theodicy in effect redefines what is taken to be “God” in Christian and Islamic theologies, and collapses the existence of an essentially *procedural* Lord with the existence of God – not unlike, we may note, in process theology.

The next passage (*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 2.1.35) considers the obvious objection to this position. Since scripture opines “Being only this was in the beginning, one, without a second,” it implies that in the very beginning of creation, no *karma* existed, so what accounts for the diversification? And if it is the case that *karma* is the factor on which creation depends, then creation is also a factor on which *karma* depends; but this is circular reasoning. The philosopher rules this out as an idle question; for it sounds exactly like the seed-and-sprout (or in the modern context “chicken-and-egg”) paradox (neither is prior). Śaṅkara’s measured response is that it is “*anādi*”: there was no such beginning, *karma* has no beginning, just as time has no beginning. He offers some justifications.

The first point to note is that creation is not *ex nihilo*; were it so, there would be a beginning. Second, had there been a beginning of creation, it would have got started by a pure accident or “causelessly.” Besides, as Matilal (1992, 366) notes on Śaṅkara’s behalf, “creatures would have to suffer a lot for which they are not at all responsible, and the varieties and inequalities of the creatures’ happiness and unhappiness would go unaccounted for. To avoid such absurd consequences, one has to admit the beginninglessness of the creation.”

With a mild apology, Matilal proffers an alternative: “However there seems to be a way out even without our conceding the beginninglessness hypothesis of the Hindus. If there was a beginning and the beginning was a happy one, but *free* creatures were created, and if through the exercise of *free will* they brought about inequalities etc. upon themselves, then the alleged absurdity vanishes” (Matilal 1992, 366).

Be that as it may, the uniqueness of the Hindu idea of the beginninglessness of the universe (in cyclical returns), and God’s dependence on the world (rather than the converse)



renders God not as independent and existing outside of, nay prior to, the created world – which marks the idea of God in Judeo-Christian monotheistic doctrines. God is bound by the *karmas* of the individual creatures even after their selves have been dissolved along with the world.

But how do we appraise God's goodness if he cannot will the good? It is nevertheless conceivable that God could *will* things otherwise, that he is aware of and possibly contemplates in his dreams other modal possibilities, and occasionally intervenes in the "worlding of the world," with a modicum of miracles gambled in. Whether God could in his merciful wisdom wipe out *all* traces of *karma*, blank out totally the manifest universe and the extant conditions, and begin a world on quite different laws and operative principles – natural and moral – is a thinking entertained in the Hindu tradition, but there is no unanimity on it.

This broadside apart, the upshot of the foregoing disquisition is that the theodicy being expounded is consistent with two presuppositions that any successful theodicy would have to underpin, namely, (i) God is limited by the laws of *karma*, which function as a kind of logical necessity; and (ii) God is not expected to do what is impossible (violate or transgress logical necessity). Given these two presuppositions, and assuming that *karma* requires or begets evil in the world, it is conceivable that both evil in the world exists *and* an omnipotent God exists.

We now move to the second major commentator on the *Brahmasūtra*, Rāmānuja (1017–1137 CE), himself an influential stalwart of Vedānta, albeit of a more "qualified nondual" version than his predecessor's – and in some ways his *bête noire*. He also founded the Vaiṣṇava sectarian theology, which veers toward a stronger unitary-theistic system (bordering on the monotheistic, though not in the dualist sense, for Rāmānuja's God bears an "*identitatem-in-differentia*" relationship with *Brahman*.) In his major opus, *Śrībhāṣya* (SB), Rāmānuja advances basically similar arguments and counterarguments against the objections raised by the skeptic. The difference is that in Rāmānuja's Vaiṣṇava-laden account, the unchanging *Brahman*, in the supreme form as Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, is the material and efficient cause of the world, which the Deity "ensouls" as his own body (Carman 1974, 139–141). This world he also sustains through his gracious immanence, and then dissolves it at the end of the epoch.

But what would be his precise motive? An objection is considered, that no merciful or benevolent God would want to create a world that is riddled with birth, old age, death, hell, and so on. Were he to inadvertently create such a world, he would be moved by compassion to re-generate a world that is suffused with happiness.<sup>4</sup> Rāmānuja's response is that *Brahman* is perfect, and what motivates him to create, sustain, and then destroy the world from his own will is "mere sport, play" (*līlā*), not unlike some powerful king, who rules his kingdom with perfect strength and valor, and yet is able to engage in a game of ball, dalliances and hunting, and so on, to amuse himself!

To the objection that God would be implicated with mercilessness for the unequal creation (as recounted earlier), Rāmānuja argues in a similar vein, but with a flourish of his own, that it all supervenes on the torque-effect of "the deeds of the intelligent beings, gods,

4 "No merciful divinity would create a world so full, as ours is, of evils of all kind – birth, old age, death, hell, and so on; – if it created at all, pity would move it to create a world altogether happy. Brahman thus having no possible motive cannot be the cause of the world" (SB II.32; Rāmānuja 1962, 226).



and so on, about to be created.” The Lord, he argues, is merely “the operative cause” in the creation of new beings, while “the material cause is constituted by the potentialities of the beings to be created.” By “potentialities,” he means the cumulative residual *karma* (Śrībhāṣya (SB), 2.1.34, Rāmānuja 1962, 267).

So like a king, who is perfect and complete, God is still capable of engaging in sport. When he perceives entropy has set in and the material world would do with a fresh look, he proceeds with that. The inequality among creatures is a direct result of their respective *karmas*. While in the Nyāya theodicy what counts as good and bad *karmas* are entirely within the provenance of the laws of *karma* and *dharma*, in Rāmānuja’s theodicy, it is how God feels about them on a fine day. What is good and what is bad *karma* is measured in terms of what is pleasing or displeasing to the Lord. Having infused himself in the selves of all beings, he knows the creatures’ every act from the vantage point of their inner Self (*antarātmā*) (SB I.1, Rāmānuja 1962, 92). Abiding therein, and controlling them in consonance with their *karma*, he allows agents the freedom to perform good or ill actions according to their respective wishes, or purely as a consequence of their *karmas*. He may reward those who perform good deeds that are pleasing to him, by helping them eradicate all evil within them, and thereby attain the four “kingdom-of-ends” of prosperity, fulfillment of desires, truth, and liberation. To those who transgress his edicts and laws, are meted out just the opposite (SB I.21, Rāmānuja 1962, 119). Madhva (1936), who followed Rāmānuja, two centuries later, veered the theory closer to a form of predestination in as much as he believed that an individual was both predisposed toward committing *pāpa* (demerited karma) and find liberation through the Lord’s grace *ceteris paribus*.

Of course, it is not necessary that the Lord, afloat half-asleep on the milky ocean, personally attends to each every action of the individual agents and their effects; this task he happily bequeaths to the lesser gods and ultimately to the automated laws of *karma*.

This account, however, embeds a certain dilemma. Suppose it is the case that the every person is a fully free agent and he can choose to act in a certain way or desist from it (that is his moral freedom, which carries a certain liability also in terms of the accrual of *karmic* residues). Since on Rāmānuja’s account, the Lord has entered the agent as the “inner controller” (*antaryāmin*) as a function of his universal causality, so technically speaking, he is also the cause of free moral actions of the agent: so the Lord is the real agent, not the individual being. He is implicated in our actions, good and bad. We know that many proclaimed enlightened beings, gurus, and highly attained adepts make such unitary claims. So why burden the individual with the moral blame, or for that matter with praiseworthiness: “It was not my achievement; it is all the Lord’s doing; it’s His wish, I am just a pawn, baba!” – we often hear such self-effacing disavowals. Why cannot this be universalized in the negative *karmic* disachievement cases, one’s personal blunders, catastrophes, harm caused to others, and so on? Rāmānuja, as Julius Lipner (1986, 71) reports, proposes a solution to this dilemma:

The Supreme Self has bestowed equitably on all conscious being all the equipment required for performing or desisting from action: for example, the capacity for the power of thought, for the power of willing, and so on. To bring this about he has become the support of these beings, and having entered within them, exercises control as the consenter [to action], being established as their principal. The individual, conditioned by these powers endowed by the supreme Self, itself performs or desists from action. The supreme Self [merely] witnesses the doing and remains impartial. Thus all is in order.

Lipner elaborates: “. . . it is the individual agent which acts freely, while the Lord as the individual’s existential support (*ādhāra*) allows this action to be realised, to take being. . . . The indwelling Lord has regard to the ‘act of will’ (*prayatna udyoga*) of the agent and consents to bring the action into existence” (Lipner 1986, 71). But Lipner has his doubts about the veracity of this “cooperative” solution. God seems to be complicitous in the agent’s supposed freely chosen bad action over a possible good action.” Lipner then correctly wonders:

For is the agent’s ‘act of will’ in the first place dependent upon the consent of the Lord or not? If it is, how is the agent really free to initiate action? If it is not, the Lord is not universal cause. There is the added problem of the Lord’s ‘consenting’ to bring an evil action of a finite agent into being: must he not be responsible for it in some way? Yet Rāmānuja has sought to do no more than provide an illuminating analogy (property by joint owners and the minimal consent required by one for the other to transfer it to the third party), by way of partial explanation, for the ‘cooperation’ between the Lord and the individual *ātman* in the performance of free action. (Lipner 1986, 71)

But what about the acts of the Lord himself, namely, creation, sport, dissolution, and so on? Do these not affect or accrue any *karma* for him? Rāmānuja’s answer invokes a principle stated more clearly in the celebrated *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.47) – were one to perform an act without any thought or desire for the result, it does not accrue binding *karma* (Bilimoria 2007b). The act is performed not out of *desire*, *necessity*, or *lack*, but out of *fullness of being*. Since God acts without any desire, his actions are not *karma*-binding. And yet God is said to have desires, goals, and objectives. So this admission might contradict the more restricted claim. Surely, in Rāmānuja’s cosmology, God is actively involved in the world; even if he had a modicum of desire that those who offer him devotion and chanting will eventually fulfill their desires and attain liberation. Conferring or distribution of grace, *prasāda*, also calls for certain telic-intentionality. But at the end of the day, this adage seems to hold true: “God’s role is cosmogenic and administrative and little else”.

Finally, on the question of whether the evil swirling around in the world, and all the impurities, inauspiciousness, and pollution could sully God’s own pure nature, Rāmānuja is adamant that “the Supreme *Brahman* is devoid of even the slightest trace of evil that is found to exist in all the intelligent and non-intelligent things. . . . The Supreme *Brahman* is the opposite of all that is evil and the sole seat of all auspicious qualities. He is entirely distinct from all other things (than Himself)” (SB 1.i.13, Rāmānuja 1962, 120, 309). Reichenbach (1998, 252), citing the earlier passage, is not convinced: how this panentheistic deity can remain separate enough from what evolves out of him, which includes evil and imperfection, to be perfect is unclear. If God is at the same time the inner-dweller (as soul) in each person, then the blemish in an agent’s soul should *ipso facto* register a “black mark” in God’s higher self as well! Why does God then not suffer pains from our evils? Again, a strict providential conception of God is lacking here. And so this seems a strange way of trying to save God from any possible blemish that may occur, albeit as an accidental property, from the evils that afflict human beings and the environment.

Later Vedānta schools, perhaps in cognizance of this possible blight on God’s pure nature, set out to wedge a greater distance between sentient beings and God. Beginning with Madhva (thirteenth century CE), the founder of the Dvaita (dualist) school, and right across to the theology of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava (fifteenth century onwards) that emphasized

devotion and piety, it is maintained that God and the world are different, separate, just as two individuals and the individual and world are different. And God is able to behold the *karma*, *duḥkha* (suffering), consequent upheavals and demise of the wayward creatures; but for a small dose of “grace” or benediction, there is not much else that God can be expected to do by way of redemption. On this point, Indian theistic theodicies, from the Nyāya to all schools of Vedānta, converge, with the difference that, apart from literary embellishments on “sport/play” on God’s part, the role of providence is increasingly allowed to enter into what we could call reformatory or sectarian Hindu theologies, after Madhva’s (1936) Vedānta.

## Conclusion

The theistic solutions we encountered and examined from Nyāya to Vedānta, in as much as their respective cosmologies supplemented with or without a decisive teleology appear to be committed to some ontology of divine creation and sustention of the world, to the problem of evil is that God cannot be held morally responsible for the evil in the world because he simply administers the consequences of the *karmically* tracked acts of sentient creatures. The accountability lies elsewhere. We have seen that this account, and variations thereof, have not been immune from criticisms, both from inside the tradition and outside of it. Within this debate, nevertheless, are located kernels of the responses to the problem of evil – or universal injustice – and the beginnings of the development of what one could conceivably call Indian theodicy: the discussions entered into in this chapter demonstrate just such a beginning.

Revisiting one of the criticisms, surely it is contradictory to say that God is omnipotent and yet cannot control, mitigate, ameliorate, or “bracket out” when deemed prudent the force of *karma* in the strict or rigid sense that nontheistic theorists hold stridently to – theirs are what we might call “karmodicy.” However, “there would be a contradiction if the law expresses a necessary truth.” (Reichenbach 1998, 250). Could God square a round hole, or lift a heavy bolder that he has created up the steep hill? He may be able to do the second but not the first. Some argue that it is not in God’s power to go against logical truths *simpliciter*: he may turn water into wine, but not take away the identity of A from itself, or deny that the conjunct of A and –A is not a self-contradiction (pre-Derrida, or Priest). As such, it is impossible for anything, including God, to break the law. Hence, that God cannot do the impossible does not count against his omnipotence (see Chapter 2).

Even so, the question is not whether God can ultimately liberate the individual from the condition of suffering at death or in time future. The question is why does God allow suffering in the first instance? Why does the suffering go on causing much damage, and why has he installed a blindingly impersonal, hard-wired compassionless law of *karma* that keeps sentient beings knotted in binding *karmas* from even before they are born, and after they die?

God’s omniscience can also be questioned for willingly allowing individuals to act badly or villainously in ways that bring about evil consequences. If God is all-knowing, then why does he permit such behaviors? Could he not intervene to avert the act that he could foresee coming, or detonate the *karmic* residues from previous acts and accrued *karma*-baggage and free the individual from such horrendously dire outcomes which will only cause more suffering? Why does God abet this gross injustice? Has he a hand in the plot? The latter

question is not trivially platitudinal, as was shown within Rāmānuja's panentheistic theology, for God having entered the world as its Higher Self, and infused his graceful immanence in the souls of every living being (in graded scale of intelligence), he not only has intimate knowledge of what are the individual's desires, *karma*, and disposition, but he is intricately and intensionally implicated in sharing the inner (mental and psychical) properties of the individual.<sup>5</sup> Why would the blemishes and rough edges of the individual's *karma* and traits not rub off on God, just as one would expect a huge tsunami when it occurs would surely cause ripples also in God's body sense (on the premise that the world and God's body are one and the same extension)? Is God complicit then? The Vedānta response, from Rāmānuja to Vaiṣṇava theologies, is that while God shares the property of intelligence with the gods and human beings, as the common bridge of pervasively extended consciousness (God's *vibhu*-Mind), and may even shower benedictions as a bonus for the hard-worked devotion and meditation of the agent, there is something of an epiphenomenon here: *a* supervenes on *b*, but *a* has no causal impact on *b*; while *b* (or another *c*) could on *a*. (Yandell 1999). God is neither the guilty partner nor one affected (as one apocryphal adage has it), even by "sleeping next to a whore," and he does not even need to run!

This apocryphal adage, and other more scholastic responses that we have considered and examined, notwithstanding, we are still left with a number of questions unanswered, more glaringly so in the combined "theo-*karma*-dicy" accounts. One is tempted to side with Kant on his misgivings about the "failure of all attempted philosophical theodicies. But then – as Matilal (1992), Reichenbach (1989, 1998), Chatterjee (1997), and others have noted, the theistic problem of evil was not the problem Indian theodicy was developed to resolve; it is primary purview being the doctrine of *karma*.

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# Earth's Epistemic Fruits for Harmony with God: An Islamic Theodicy

MOHAMMAD ALI MOBINI

## Introduction

We can easily see many evils around us, some of which are horrendous in our view. There are innumerable moral evils and people act cruelly toward each other; some instances of which are: killing, torturing, stealing, deceiving and violating, especially when the victims of such evils are children and weaker people. Also, there are natural evils through which many people and animals suffer painfully and many others are killed: painful diseases, floods, earthquakes, conflagrations, and holocausts are some instances. We cannot deny the evil of such things. So, the question arises about God's reason for putting humans on the earth and leaving them to do and suffer evil (see Chapter 1). This is not only a human question; the first of those who raised this question were God's angels: "And when your Lord said to the angels: 'I am putting a viceroy on the earth,' they said: 'Will You set in it one who will cause corruption in it and shed blood, while we glorify You with praise and proclaim Your sanctity?' He said: 'Verily I know what you do not know'" (Qur'an 2:30; nearly all page citations within the chapter refer to the Qur'an. The first number refers to the Qur'an's chapter, known as *sura*, and the second number refers to its verses known as *ayah* (2:30 means *sura* 2: *ayah* 30)). So the question is: What is it that God knows and that explains putting humans on the earth at the expense of the occurrence of such horrendous evils?

My answer will be an Islamic answer in the following sense: first, my presuppositions will be drawn from Islamic doctrines; and, second, the answer itself can be supported by them. Since the Qur'an is the most fundamental religious source for Muslims, and is believed to contain the direct words of God, it is the first and basic source of research for anyone who seeks a pure Islamic view on a subject. For this reason, in this chapter, I will focus my attention on the verses of the Qur'an to support my claims. Of course, this work could be continued by referring to a huge mass of narrations (hadiths), which are quoted from the sacred Islamic persons, foremost among whom, according to the Shi'ite view, are

the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter (Fatimah), and his 12 successors, the Imams, all of whom are believed to be divinely immunized from any sin or mistake. Another kind of work would examine the wide variety of views expressed by Muslim thinkers from the origin of Islam up to now, including Muslim philosophers, theologians, jurists, and mystics.

## The Best Life Depending on Harmony with God

In the traditions of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought, it is commonly accepted that existence is good, and that we prefer to exist rather than not to exist. However, since there could be different sorts of existing, the important question is what sort of existing is good and admirable. For the initial answer, we may say that good existence of any living thing depends on whether it can be fully alive, that is, if one's full potential is actualized or not. Regarding human beings, it seems that if a person is in circumstances in which one can actualize one's full potential, one will have a good existence. Human beings are not the same and have different talents and skills; some people have physical skills and others mental ones; some people can be good artists and some can be good engineers; some can be good speakers and some good critics. The good life for any person depends on whether one's potential can be fully actualized. This understanding of life as having various aspects, each of which is intensified with the realization of potential is established in the Qur'an. The Qur'an states that God's revealed words have a warning function for those who have life (36:69–70), and by life it means the good work of one's reason, and this indicates that God's word is useful only for those whose reason works well and is alive. The Qur'an, also, regards people who turn away from God's words as dead and proclaims to Muhammad that he cannot make such a people who are dead in their reason hear (27:80). Life in this present world and life in the world to come also are regarded as two different levels of life. As compared with the life in the other world, this worldly life is regarded as a paltry little thing (9:38).

With such a meaning of life, it may be asked whether all existents together can have a good life or not, while the good life of some existents leads to the damage of other lives. Even in a single individual, is it possible for any individual to actualize *all* his potentialities? Any individual has a variety of interests and potentialities so that actualizing some of them may depend on ignoring some others.

It seems that a theistic view that supports the existence of God with such exalted attributes as all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise and all-just can provide an answer in favor of the possibility of a good life for all existents together. If God exists and has such attributes, He will create each of His creatures with some especial role in existence so that this role never conflicts with other roles. The good life of each existent depends on playing the precise role that its Creator has assigned to it. The better it plays its role, the better life it would have. In fact, having a good life is a matter of being put rightly in this jigsaw-like world. In this picture, the kind of relation of any existent with others is the key factor in producing a good life. Since we are presuming that God is all-just, all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-wise, there is no role in the divine design that demands the devastation of others' roles. The good life is realized only by this harmony and being put in our right place and not deviating from our assigned role.<sup>1</sup>

1 The difference between perfectionism and my idea is that on my view, it is not the case that the more we actualize our potentialities (e.g., the more we know or the more we have power) the better; the better is to actualize



Presupposing the existence of God as our Creator, the most fundamental harmony that renders life best is the harmony between God as the independent Being and His creatures as beings dependant on Him (see Chapter 15). According to the Qur'an, harmony with God and acknowledging Him as the unique Creator is so vitally important that lack of it cannot be compensated by anything. The worst thing that causes alienation of the disharmonious agent is disharmony with God and the rejection of Him as the unique Creator and Lord: "Verily God does not forgive to set partner with Him, and He forgives other than that for whom He wills. And whoever ascribes partners to God has certainly strayed a far straying" (4:116). Accordingly, any apparently harmonious action that disregards this basic harmony is not fruitful: "... and whoever rejects faith, his works become vain indeed and in the hereafter he will be among the losers" (5:5). So our harmonious actions toward others will be fruitful and bring us a good life provided it accompanies harmony with God and the acceptance of His determinant role in existence: "Whoever does good work, man or woman, provided he has faith, We will certainly make him live a pure life . . ." (16:97).

Principally, God's purpose of creation can be thought to be the realization of divine harmony, the actualization of His role of lordship toward His creatures, and the acceptance of the roles of His creatures in worshipping Him. He intends to produce a world all of whose members are in harmony with one another and all of which are in mutual harmony with Him, so that all can have a good life by playing their assigned roles. Creatures' harmony with God is to play their worshipping roles toward Him and not to show any arrogance toward Him: "And to God prostrates whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth of the moving creatures, as well as the angels, and they do not show pride" (16:49). In fact, creatures' harmony with God is to acknowledge Him as their Creator and their Lord and to submit entirely to Him, because it is He who has created everything and has assigned a special role to everyone in harmony with others, and it is He who knows best how to produce good life for all.

## **Submission to God as the Necessary Condition for a Good Human Life (The Meaning of *Islam*)**

Among all the kinds of harmony, each of which has its own goodness, there could be a very valuable kind that is distinguished from others in an important way. In all other harmonies between God and creatures, only one side of harmony is active; it is God alone who produces harmony between Himself and His creatures. But there could be a kind of harmony both sides of which are active and have an important role in producing harmony. Mankind has such ability to play this important role in producing harmony between himself and God, and therefore, the good life of mankind depends on playing this role and

our potentialities (to know and to have power) just as much as our role demands and makes us come into a right relation with others. It is not good, for example, to know about others' faults and secrets. So the harmonious aspect of life on which I am insisting makes my idea distinct from perfectionism.

The significance of harmony can be the basis for a theory of value. In this theory, the egoism of traditional perfectionist theories can be avoided because life is seen to have a harmonious aspect that requires care about others' lives.

actualizing this ability. God creates mankind for this purpose and wants him to contribute to the harmonious union with Him. Indeed, His purpose of creating humanity is twofold; that He shows His harmony with humans and humans show their harmony with Him; that is, He intends, on one hand, to play His lordship role toward humans by having mercy on them, "... and for that He created them ..." (11:119), and on the other hand, humans show their harmony with Him by playing the role of worshiping Him, a role than which no more is required: "And I did not create jinn and mankind except to worship Me. I do not want from them any sustenance and I do not want that they feed Me. Verily, it is God who is the All provider, the Lord of Power, the Strong" (51:56–58).

God never wants human beings to deprive themselves of enjoying what God has provided for them; good life for humans depends partly on satisfying their desires. God plays the providing role and humans are to accept this role of their Creator to produce a right harmony with Him; "O, you who believe! Eat of the good things We have provided for you and give thanks to God if it is Him that you worship" (2:172). However, the important point for keeping harmony with God and with His other creatures is that any person should surrender himself to God's plan and not exceed the limitations for satisfying his desires; "O, you who believe! Do not forbid the good things that God has made lawful to you and do not transgress; verily, God does not like the transgressors" (5:87). Submission to God, then, as He who has created everything and knows best how to provide a good life for all, and performing only the role that God has assigned to any of us, is the only way for achieving happiness and a good life; "O, you who believe! Answer to God and to His messenger when He calls you to that which gives you life ..." (8:24).

Submission to God and worshiping only Him is the most important thing for a good life, so that the Qur'an regards it as God's religion; "Do they seek other than God's religion, while to Him submits whoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly ...?" (3:83). By "God's religion," the Qur'an means submitting to God, and the Arabic word that it uses for this is "*islam*"; "And whoever seeks a religion Other than *islam* [submitting to God], it shall not be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter he shall be among the losers" (3:85). *Islam*, then, means submitting to God, and Muslim is any person who surrenders himself to God. The submission, of course, is an entire and thorough submission and those who have partial submission to God so that they believe in some and disbelieve in some are regarded as truly disbelievers (4:150–151). Accordingly, *islam* in our time includes believing in what God has sent to Muhammad as well (47:2).

## Human Epistemic Privilege and the Need to Be Trained

Angels also may have an active role in their mutual harmony with God, but there is a noticeable verse in the Qur'an that refers to the epistemic privilege of mankind (2:31). This kind of privilege makes humans preferable to angels as God's viceroy on the earth so that those angels are commanded to be at the service of mankind and prostrate before Adam (2:34). I think that this epistemic privilege of humanity can explain God's actions toward humans. When God announced that He was going to create humans and put them on the earth, an important question was raised for the angels. They knew that God's purpose of creation was to have creatures who are in a mutual harmony with Him so that they would play their worshiping role toward God and He would perform His role of lordship toward

them. The angels knew that humans would do many disharmonious works on the earth. So, the question was why God did not prefer the angels for the task of worshiping Him on the earth and producing mutual harmony with Him when they were completely ready for such a task without fear of producing any disharmonious works: “. . . Will You set in it one who will cause corruption in it and shed blood, while we glorify You with praise and proclaim Your sanctity?” (2:30).<sup>2</sup> God’s response to them is significant.

And He taught Adam the names, all of them; then He presented them to the angels and said: “Inform Me of the names of these, if you are right.”

They said: “Glory be to You! We have no knowledge save what You have taught us. Verily, it is You who are the All-knowing, the All-wise.”

He said: “O Adam, inform them of their names,” then when he had informed them of their names, He said: “Did I not tell you that I know verily the Unseen things of the heavens and the earth?” And I know what you disclose and what you were hiding. (2:31–33)

God refers to the epistemic privilege of humans that makes their presence on the earth preferred, though at the expense of the occurrence of evils. This epistemic privilege is the human ability to know *all* the names while angels do not have such ability. According to some defensible commentaries, when the angels, before the All-knowing God, admitted that they have no knowledge save what God has taught them, they referred to their kind of existence with its special epistemic capacity. They confessed that they had some epistemic limitation by their nature, and naturally when they are created by God, they are created with this natural limitation. God’s teaching them, here, means that God has given them their special epistemic capacity, which can be called ‘natural teaching.’<sup>3</sup>

The epistemic limitation of angels, according to some commentaries, prevents the angels from having a comprehensive knowledge of God. While humans have the ability to obtain comprehensive knowledge of God so as to know God with all His names and attributes, each kind of angel can know God only in some aspect. Since their nature is simple and each kind has only a single attribute, each kind is able to know only one name of God according to the attribute it has. Because of this, the angels’ act of worshiping God differs from one kind to another. According to their attributes and so according to their kind of knowledge of God, one kind of angel, for example, is always prostrating and some other kind is always bowing. But humans have a combination of different attributes and because of this, they are able to obtain knowledge of God, and so worship God, in all aspects. God’s teaching Adam all the names means God’s creating Adam with different potentialities and attributes so that he is able to obtain knowledge in different aspects. Being confronted with Adam, each kind of angel, according to their nature, acknowledged one of his epistemic abilities and so they altogether acknowledged the full epistemic ability of Adam according to which he can know different aspects of God.<sup>4</sup> This commentary posits a relationship

2 According to some commentaries, there are some angels who are entirely neglectful of any other thing than worshiping God and even they were not among the questioners. (See Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i 1996, volume 17, 226.)

3 See for example, Naser Makarem Shirazi (1995, volume 1, 178–179).

4 See Muhsin Fayḍ Kashani (1994, volume 1, 110–115).

between humans' epistemic and nonepistemic sides. In order to have knowledge in different aspects, one must have different attributes, according to each of which one can obtain some kind of knowledge. Some similar views have been presented by some western thinkers when they insist on a firm connection between the epistemic and the nonepistemic such as the emotional sides of humans.<sup>5</sup>

If humans must have different attributes and emotions to obtain a full knowledge of God, then such emotions, themselves, may prevent humans from worshiping God and so make the act of harmonizing with God much harder. God aimed to produce this kind of harmony and created mankind with such a purpose that He plays His role of lordship and mankind actively plays the worshiping role. At the time of the creation of mankind, God performed all harmonious actions toward humanity and provided humans with all favors according to His lordship role. Reciprocally, humans were to show God harmony by the role of worshiping Him through their obedience: "And We said: 'Adam! Dwell you and your wife in the garden, and eat from it bountifully wherever you both wish, and do not approach this tree, so you will be of those who do injustice'" (2:35). Humans, however, could not pass the test and failed to play their assigned role and committed a disharmonious work: "... and Adam disobeyed his Lord, so he went astray" (20:121).

An important indication of these verses is that God's initial choice has not been to make humans suffer, but His first choice has been to harmonize with them and behave towards them with His mercy, because this is His purpose of creation. More generally, however, His purpose of creation has been a mutual harmony between Him and His creatures through their respective roles of lordship and worship. Good life is realized only through this harmonious union with God, and disharmony with the Creator brings about severe damage to life.

Now, a question arises about Adam's disharmonious work: Why did Adam do such disharmonious work when he was in a good epistemic situation and knew God with all His names? Why did he not surrender himself to God with such knowledge he had? To answer the question, we may appeal to views that insist on the connection of human epistemic and nonepistemic sides. For having varieties of knowledge, humans need to have varieties of attributes and emotions. At the same time, having such emotions may have some negative impacts on the epistemic side, if it is not be trained well, and make humans neglectful of their knowledge. For example, it was Adam's *greed* for an eternal life that made Adam make an epistemic error so that he was deceived by Satan, and this epistemic error in its turn led Adam to oppose God and eat from the tree that he regarded it as the tree of immortality (20:120–121). So it is not the case that the less human beings are at an epistemic distance from God, the less free choice they have for worshiping Him.<sup>6</sup> The earlier verses indicate that Adam had good knowledge of God while he committed a disharmonious work.<sup>7</sup>

5 For getting informed of some recent debates about the epistemological relevance of emotions, see Brun *et al.* (2008).

6 For a defense of such claim, see John Hick's soul-making theodicy in his *Evil and the God of Love* (Hick 1985), part IV.

7 The problem about Adam, then, was not his epistemic distance from God, but the problem was that his epistemic side was not trained well against his nonepistemic side. Yes, when one is in less epistemic distance from God, one might not commit some trivial sins, but it might be that one commits sin against God for some greater things. For example, when one feels the enjoyment of knowledge of God, it might be that one does not surrender to God and is not satisfied with what God sees as right for one and one may demand God to give one more knowledge of Himself while one fails to keep one's harmony with God as well as with His other creatures.

The upshot is that for having a full epistemic ability, we need full attributes and emotions. Nevertheless, having full attributes and emotions may also have some negative impact on our epistemic ability. To prevent such negative impact, our epistemic ability must be trained well so that it always has prevalence and we never become neglectful of our knowledge. Adam's disharmonious action originated from an epistemic fault (forgetfulness, negligence), so that his greed for eternal life made him forgot God's lordship role in the realization of such a life, and this indicates a human epistemic deficiency. Therefore, humans need some fortunate and some appropriate circumstances to train their epistemic capacity so that what they know is never neglected, never extinguished. If our epistemic capacity is trained in this way and if our knowledge always prevails over our emotions and desires, then we could have a constant harmony with God and surrender to Him in a guaranteed way without opposing God because of our desires; because we know and never forget, then, that our good life is realized only with harmony with God. If our epistemic capacity is trained well, we will not repeat our father's epistemic errors and we will not be pulled into disharmony with God again and we will not damage our lives.

Among other things, the earth has been provided by God for an epistemic purpose: so that humans can train their epistemic capacities (see Chapter 14). According to His lordship role, God wants to help human beings to receive an eternal good life through harmony with Him. For a constant harmony with God, however, humans need to remove their epistemic deficiencies and arrive at a safe epistemic point.<sup>8</sup> It is through earthly conditions that humans can train their epistemic capacity and make it so that it always gains the control of their emotions and desires and actions. It is due to God's mercy, then, not due to His punishment, that humans are put on the earth. Of course, disharmony with God is a very big fault that Adam committed, but it is not the case that we are put on the earth to be punished by God for our father's sin. Rather, it is due to His mercy that we are put on the earth to be trained well and to learn to harmonize with God forever. According to the Qur'an, not only did God forgive Adam's disharmonious work, but He selected him for the contribution in making harmony with Him and guided him for this: "Then his Lord chose him, so He forgave him and guided him" (20:122). Accordingly, when Adam was put on the earth, he was forgiven and guided by God, and the reason for being put on the earth was to become ready for harmony with Him.

## God's Epistemic Aid

It is only through the earthly conditions that humans can remove their epistemic deficiencies and arrive at an epistemic safe point so that it will guarantee their harmony with God. It is after reaching this epistemic safe point that humans can gain the necessary competence for having a good life through harmonizing with God forever. A significant aspect of the earth is that it provides humans with experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge, as

8 The importance of knowing God for a constant harmony with Him can be used from some Islamic narrations, such as what is quoted from Imam Husayn (the third successor of the Prophet Muhammad, according to Shi'ite view): "God didn't create His servants except for them to know Him, when they know Him, they worship Him, and when they worship Him, they no longer have any need to worship other than Him" (Al-Shaykh al-Saduq 2004, 56). As I will say earth is a good ground for obtaining some *experiential* knowledge of God that is very effective in leading human beings to harmony with God.

compared with nonexperiential knowledge, has a very strong impact on humans. For example, all humans really know that they will die. But when one observes someone's dying, it has a special impact on him. As another example, according to the Qur'an, Abraham knew that God will revive the dead. However, he asked God to show him how He does this and his reason for this request was that this observation would have a special impact on his heart: "And when Abraham said: 'My Lord show me how you give life to the dead,' He said: 'do you not believe?' He said: 'Yes, but in order that my heart may be at rest' . . ." (2:260). Now we can say that although Adam in the garden knew all the names and attributes of God, it (or at least some of it) was not experiential knowledge.

The earth is so provided that the different relations with God as well as with His creatures can be examined. Indeed, the earth is provided as a laboratory so that we can observe the result of different sorts of existing, such as existing with harmony with God or disharmony with Him, also existing with harmony between His creatures or disharmony between them. In any kind of existing, we can see God's reaction toward it and so receive a better understanding of God that is based on experience. So, the earth is a testing ground for us in which we can test the different manners of existing and see what sort is the best. Of course, God could have given us all such knowledge without sending us to this testing ground, but this would not have been experiential knowledge. Indeed, God has equipped humans with the necessary knowledge about Himself before sending them to the earth. To make such knowledge effective, however, He has sent them into this laboratory in order that their knowledge be supported and strengthened by experiential knowledge.

An appropriate testing ground could be very beneficial and valuable for a being who is to contribute actively to harmony with God. However, we should keep in mind that a laboratory has its own rules and we do not expect an ideal life from a laboratorial world. In a laboratory, some rules are justified by its creator while this is not justified outside of the laboratory.<sup>9</sup> The consoling thing that makes the life in a testing ground tolerable is that the laboratory is very ephemeral and passing. The Qur'an regards a main characteristic of this world as that it is very transient as compared with the world to come. When people are gathered in the hereafter, their thought about this present world is ". . . as if they had not stayed but for an evening or its forenoon" (79:46) or even ". . . as if they had not stayed but for an hour of the day . . ." (10:45). Yet God insists that "We did not create the heavens and the earth and all between them in play. We did not create them save in truth; but most of them do not know" (44:38–39). Although, a testing ground could have rational ends, life in a testing place is not an ideal life, and because of this, in the Qur'an, it is stated that ". . . the life of this world is nothing compared with the world to come but a [trivial] enjoyment" (13:26). So the rational way is to take this testing life to be used for preparing for the ideal life, because "the life of this world is nothing but a sport and a play, and the last abode is verily Life, if they knew!" (29:64).

Other than providing a testing ground for man, another important epistemic help from God is that He has provided humans with the necessary knowledge for living in harmony with Him. Fundamental to this knowledge that is provided for man is knowledge of Himself and His lordship role. God has given human beings such knowledge from the first,

9 As I will say, in a temporary laboratorial world, God is justified to show us some degree of disharmonies between His creatures in order to give us some useful experiential knowledge that would be beneficial for our good life outside the laboratory and make us ready for eternal life.



before they come to this earthly world, and has made them face Him as their Lord. He has "... made them witness over themselves: 'Am I not your Lord?' They said: 'Yes we testify to it.' Lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection verily we were heedless of this" (7:172). Also, in this present world, God shows His signs to man. In many verses of the Qur'an, it is insisted that there are clear signs of God, and whoever rejects these signs is in a serious loss: "And do not be of those who reject signs of God, then you will be of the losers" (10:95). According to the Qur'an, God has provided us with His signs both inside and outside us and the Creator Himself suffices as the witness: "We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that He is the truth. Is it not Sufficient that your Lord is witness over all things?" (41:53).

According to the Qur'an, then, there are enough signs of God in the world so that, while encountering evils, we are not justified in losing our faith in His existence as well as His unique attributes, including His unique knowledge, power, wisdom, justice, and mercy. Signs for the existence, unity and mercy of God surround us, and they are sufficient for anyone who is ready for understanding (2:163–164). With such clear signs, encountering evils never justifies us in doubting Him.<sup>10</sup> However, it is possible that while we have knowledge about something, our heart may still not be at ease; the case of Abraham as I mentioned earlier is an example for this. As another example, a mother may have epistemic grounds sufficient to know that her child will stay alive after a surgery, but her heart is not at rest until she faces her child and gains an experiential knowledge of her child's life. The problem of evil is so amazing that from the beginning of the creation of the human being, the question about it was raised by angels who confidently believed in God's wisdom and knowledge (2:32). Not only did God not reproach them for this question, He helped them to understand the truth about it (2:31–33). So in order to increase our knowledge about God and make our hearts at rest, we are allowed to try to answer the question of evil and to try to understand God's reasons for the evils we encounter.

## The Epistemic Fruits of the Earthly Testing Ground

Now, the important question as to the testing function of the earth is this: How do earthly conditions help us to remove our epistemic deficiencies and make us ready for harmony with God? The general answer is that in this transient laboratorial world, we get a variety of experiences that are effective for making us experientially convinced that only through harmony with God we can have a good life. Of course, God Himself could make us convinced of this by making us like robots and could make us in harmony with Him by fiat, without putting us into such conditions; but this would prevent us from playing our roles in harmony with Him and would deprive us of having a good life because our kind of existence would be distorted. A short stop in this earthly testing ground, then, could grant us a good life forever.

10 This is comparable with what Brian Davies regards as the "We Know that God Exists" Argument (Davies 2006, 17). Defending such an argument in his book, Davies sees this Argument "implicit in a great deal of Christian philosophical thinking" and takes it "to be evident, for instance, in the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and Thomas Aquinas." He also regards Nelson Pike and Alvin Plantinga as the recent defenders of this argument (Davies 2006, 28–29, note 31).



The earthly laboratory is so made that while it is under God's control and in harmony with His ends, a variety of disharmonies happen inside it; disharmonies between the natural inanimate phenomena, between them and plants and animals, between animals themselves, and between any of them on the one hand and human beings on the other hand. These disharmonies can be divided into two major types: disharmonies that are relevant to the actions done by human beings and disharmonies that are irrelevant to them. Regardless of such a division, however, experiencing these disharmonies, generally, can help humans to gain a better understanding of the importance of harmony in existence and the importance of God's lordship role as well. According to the principle that "things are known better by their opposites," this is a rational way that we experience in a laboratory some controlled opposites of our ends. Such experiencing can give us a better understanding of our ends and appreciation of them. Therefore, it could be regarded as a special justified law for a transient testing ground that we can be shown the importance of things by being shown their opposites.

It seems that, at one level, God confronts us with an artificial world without God in which disharmonies are found; and at another level, He shows us His control over such disharmonies so that they do not yield the entire corruption of the world as well as His mercy on us against such disharmonies. Comparing these two levels and contrasting disharmonies with harmonies is a good way to make us able to evaluate the two sides in an appropriate way. Through such collating information, we understand better how the inharmonious world would be. Indeed, at one level, we experience how the world would be without God, and that it would be full of disharmonies. By experiencing such an opposite world, we get a better knowledge of the world with the presence of the merciful God. We get a good understanding of the need for God's role and we will become ready to accept His role. Such experience is very important for receiving a good eternal life. God first put man into a world like paradise under His harmonious control, and when it became clear for man that he needed to improve his epistemic capacity and to experience the importance of God's role in his life, God put him into this laboratory to make him obtain such epistemic fruits. It is through experiencing the worldly disharmonies that we receive the firm idea that only those who can harmonize themselves with others and fit themselves with the conditions of existence could remain and have good life;<sup>11</sup> and the most important harmony that we need to achieve is the harmony between ourselves and our Creator and fit our existence with His existence as the Lord.

The other aspect of the epistemic function of the earthly conditions is that we can test the degree of our commitment to what we know and improve it. We are faced with clear signs of God that are sufficient for knowing God's lordship in the world and His exalted attributes, such as His wisdom, goodness and justice. Now it is the matter of our commitment that we do not become neglectful of such clear signs in different conditions and that we should be firm in our confidence in God; it is only through steadfastness in approving

11 William Rowe sees no reasonable good in some instances of suffering such as animal suffering in the forests (see Rowe 1979). According to my view, however, the disharmonies that happen and produce sufferings all have epistemic impact on human beings. If one objects with reference to animal sufferings of which we never obtain knowledge, then we can ask how you affirm such sufferings. All sufferings that we affirm are within the realm of our knowledge, at least in a general manner. So, the knowledge of the disharmony of the world evidenced by the knowledge of innocent animal suffering may be a part of the unavoidable circumstances necessary for the epistemic conditions of our own position in the laboratorial world in which we test ourselves and are tested.

God's lordship role that we can play our role appropriately and accept God's harmonious role: "Verily, those who have said our lord is God then have remained steadfast, the angels descend upon them (and say) that do not fear and nor feel saddened and receive the good tidings of the paradise that you were promised" (41:30). We are confronted with some degree of disharmonies in order that the degree of our commitment to our knowledge and our patience with harmony with God's lordship is tested. Only those who can remain constant in their devotion to God under any circumstances deserve God's blessings: "And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and loss of wealth and lives and fruits. And give glad tidings to the patient" (2:155).

An important aspect of the earthly laboratory is that God has subjected it to human beings: "Do you not see that God has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and the earth and made complete to you His favors outwardly and inwardly? . . ." (31:20). This gives man the opportunity to examine it by his own hands as he wishes and to see the result. Indeed, the present world is made so that human actions have noticeable effects on it and human beings can test the results of their actions in the world. This provides a good chance for those who have failed to commit themselves to belief in God because of their epistemic deficiencies; they gain some supporting experiential knowledge about the results of their disharmonious actions in the world, especially the results of their disharmony with God. When man himself experiences the dangers of disharmony with God as well as the importance of harmony with Him for his life, then this guarantees a constant harmony between him and God, both sides of which are active. Indeed, the earth is a testing ground for humans in which they can test the results of different kinds of relation with God through which they can obtain some precious experiential knowledge that is very useful for accepting a right relation with God.

Of course, in this present world, humans do not experience the whole result of their disharmonious actions against God. We may not imagine the degree of the importance of the existence of God as it really is nor the degree of the danger of disharmony with Him. According to the Qur'an, in this testing ground, due to God's mercy, we only are shown some results of our disharmonious actions, not all of them, though such results are not small in our view: "Corruption has appeared in the land and the sea, because of what the people's hands have earned, to make them taste some part of what they have done, so that they may return" (30:41). God only wants to show humans the awfulness of their disharmonious actions, and because of His mercy, He lets people test only *some* results of their deeds in this present world in order for them to know what might happen in the everlasting world for their life if they do not accept God's lordship role and do not play their assigned role toward Him: "And any misfortune that befalls on you is because of what your own hands have earned, and He forgives much" (42:30). Of course, God can prevent the whole results of humans' disharmony in this earthly laboratory, and "no misfortune befalls save by God's leave . . ." (64:11). But God lets people experience some results of their deeds to allow them to understand the high degree of the awfulness of their deeds and to return to God: "And We shall surely make them taste the nearer punishment before the greater; so that they may return" (32:21).

As I stated before, the disharmonies in the present world can be divided into two major parts: disharmonies that are relevant to the actions done by human beings and disharmonies that are irrelevant to this. We might not distinguish exactly between the human-relevant disharmonies and the human-irrelevant ones, but according to religious texts as well as human religious experiences, even natural events could be affected by the kind of

relation humans have with God. There are many religious claims according to which some diseases have been healed, or some natural events have been changed by praying and asking from God. The point that should be noticed is that this earthly testing ground has a social aspect according to which people can test their social conduct as well. According to a divine law, "... Verily God does not change what is with a nation, until they change what is with themselves ..." (13:11). So the prevailing conduct of a people is effective: "And if the people of the towns had believed and been God-wary, We would have opened to them blessings from the heaven and the earth; but they rejected, so We seized them because of what they have earned" (7:96).

According to what I said until now, in order to play our roles in existence and receive a right relation with God, we need to develop our epistemic character and remove our epistemic deficiencies. Some degree of the disharmonies in the world is to show us the importance of harmony with God. Also, it is to test the degree of our commitment to what we know about God. Another degree of the disharmonies in the world, however, is due to human actions. Such human-relevant disharmonies also have epistemic effects for human beings and provide them with some supporting experiential knowledge that can serve for developing their epistemic attitudes about God and their relation with Him. Some human beings may remove their epistemic deficiencies and strengthen their commitment to what they know about God by experiencing the results of their harmonious and disharmonious conducts.

Still, there could be very precious experiential knowledge that would be produced at the end of history. During history, human beings test the different ways to lead a good life. They adopt a variety of views about the world and their kind of behavior toward it. They do their best to achieve real happiness and examine the different ways for this. These different ways cannot be examined only by one generation at a time, and each generation during history can test only some ways. It is at the end of history that the upshot is obtained when all ways have been examined and the whole ability of humanity has been exhausted. The experiential knowledge obtained at the end of history of this laboratory would be very valuable and would grant humans a firm confidence about the result. Such experiential knowledge is nothing except that man sees that there is really no way for his good life except by harmony with the Creator so that he accepts His role and plays his own role toward Him.

This final experiential knowledge is a reliable guarantee for a constant harmony between man and God, both sides of which are active and makes humans ready for entering God's eternal paradise. Before the end of history and the day of resurrection, no person enters the original paradise, and all dead people are put in a world beyond this present world: "... and behind them is a barrier until the day they are raised" (23:100). Accordingly, the dead might share all experiences of the living including the final experiential knowledge that is gained at the end of history. So it is not the case that when a person is dead, everything is over for him. Living in this present world is only one part of the role that any of human beings is to play. Anyone who comes to this testing ground will play his laboratorial role according to what God has assigned. Each human being, including men and women and children, play their assigned roles in this laboratory, and then are transferred to the other world to observe what happens on the testing ground.

The present world, therefore, is not the only chance for soul development, because this world is only a part of God's program, and people, even children we may say, in the other world could have epistemic development while they are watching what happens

in this world. Furthermore, God gives every existent a special role, and having a good life is to play that role. The children who have died are given this role and they will have a good life because of playing this laboratorial role. We cannot criticize God for this, because the different roles are necessary for good life in general. The important point is that good life depends on playing the assigned role and children would have a good life because they have played their assigned role.

## Acknowledgments

Special thanks are due to Professor Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen, who provided me with very effective comments and advice. I also thank the respectable editors of this volume, Professors Justin McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder, as well as the reviewers of this chapter for all their helpful guides and incisive comments.

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# On Constructing a Jewish Theodicy

DAVID SHATZ

How does one construct a Jewish theodicy? A simple and tempting answer goes like this: One takes Jewish sources – Bible, Talmud, Midrash, medieval and modern Jewish philosophies – and extracts from them the dominant opinion about why there is evil. *Voilà* – there is your Jewish theodicy.

The task, unfortunately, is hardly this simple. First, there are *many* theodicies in Jewish tradition, and it is difficult if not arbitrary to isolate one as dominant. Jewish theodicies contradict one another with respect to such major questions as the extent of divine intervention in the world and the correctness of divine approval theories of goodness. Second, numerous traditional sources despair of ever coming up with a correct theodicy. Third, the method I described seems to be purely historical and interpretive, rather than philosophical. The Jewish philosopher wants not only to describe and interpret what Jews have thought (both formidable tasks, to be sure), but also to do normative work – to assess whether what they have thought is convincing.

I propose that, for a Jewish *philosopher*, a Jewish theodicy should satisfy two desiderata: (1) overlap or at least connectivity, or at the *very* least, compatibility with Jewish tradition, and (2) philosophical cogency.<sup>1</sup> There is no guarantee that the theodicy that is the most cogent philosophically is dominant in Jewish tradition, or even connected with it at all, or even compatible with Jewish theological ideas; in the last two cases, it is not clear in what sense it is a *Jewish* theodicy. If a theodicy is constructed as a fusion, however cohesive, of scattered elements in the tradition, its Jewishness is diminished because the theodicy *per se* is not in the tradition. Thus, whereas many philosophers look for explanations of evil that “work” without asking whether they can work within particular religious traditions, the Jewish philosopher’s task would be to either find a theodicy with a reasonably loud voice in tradition and show it is philosophically cogent, or take a cogent theodicy and locate it reasonably well in the tradition, or build a theodicy out of elements in the tradition. The

<sup>1</sup> Laura Ekstrom’s chapter (Chapter 18) touches on such issues in a Christian context.

“Jewishness” of the theodicy will be a matter of degree, and the Jewish philosopher might compromise on Jewishness for the sake of cogency.

We may clarify the connections between religious traditions and the problem of evil by distinguishing four sorts of theodicy, confining ourselves to theistic religions:

- (1) *Universalist Theodicy*: This type of theodicy uses only propositions that are consistent with atheism and hence could be accepted by atheists who pose the problem of evil.<sup>2</sup>
- (2) *Maverick Theodicy*: A maverick theodicy relative to a particular theistic religion is one that uses propositions that at least ostensibly are inconsistent with some tenets of that religion – for example, a “limited God” theodicy (albeit many limited-God theologians argue that they hew more closely to the biblical portrayal of God than do “perfect being” theologians).
- (3) *Weakly Particularist Theodicy*: This refers to a theodicy that uses propositions that are explicitly stated or implied by more than one theistic religion, but are not consistent with atheism. (I leave aside nontheistic religions.)
- (4) *Strongly Particularist Theodicy*: This is a theodicy that can be used only by adherents of one particular theistic religion because only they explicitly state or imply the propositions used in the theodicy. Example: a Christian theodicy that depends upon claims about the Incarnation or original sin.

In (3) and (4), we can have either a theodicy compounded out of elements in the religion, or a full-blown theodicy stated in the religion. Notions of what is “accepted in one’s religion,” and even what individuates religions, of course will differ.

Numerous philosophers have argued that, in their debate with atheists, theodicists are perfectly entitled to draw upon their particular traditions; one can argue further that they must not be mavericks, and still further (plausibly or implausibly) that it is ideal to arrive at a strongly particularist theodicy. These conditions would both open up theodicy options for a particular religion, and place constraints upon them. I shall cite a few Christian and Jewish authors who advocate for the legitimacy or positive value of using particularist propositions in constructing theodicies:

Marilyn McCord Adams (1990, 210): “Where the internal coherence of a system is at stake, successful arguments for its inconsistency must draw on premises internal to that system or obviously acceptable to its adherents.”

Ira M. Schnall (2007, 50): “[S]ome problems for theism can be given much more simple, effective, and elegant solutions if we do not limit ourselves to mere theism itself, but rather make use of the resources of developed theistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”

2 I have in mind here a judgment like “the value of free will outweighs the disvalue of suffering,” which is consistent with atheism, as opposed to the proposition, “God allows evil in order to promote free will,” which is not consistent with atheism because it implies God’s existence. So refinements are needed to more precisely define universalist theodicy, such as (as a first move) distinguishing building blocks of a theodicy from the theodic statement per se. Note that some building blocks of some theodicies are compatible with atheism but not with all theistic religions. I will not fine-grain the categories further, however, to isolate such theodicies.

Moshe Sokol (2007, 235): "Might not there be resources, beliefs, or attitudes [within a religious system] that themselves eliminate the purported inconsistency? . . . What counts as problematic for the system depends upon what the system itself teaches."

Peter van Inwagen (2006, 6): "Attempts by theists to account for the evils of the world must take place within the constraints provided by the larger theologies they subscribe to."

It may be debated, as I said, whether it is *an ideal* that a theodicy be particularist, and also whether a theodicy for a particular religion should ideally match or connect to *theodicies* that are part of the tradition, as opposed to connecting to propositions from which a theodicy can be constructed. More importantly, although it is true that a religion's theodicy may justifiably draw on propositions that the religion accepts but other religions and/or atheists reject, a theodicy developed in this particularist fashion should not be allowed to escape criticism simply on the grounds that, once we take into account the relevant particularistic propositions, the existence of evil does not render the existence of God improbable. After all, there is no reason for atheists to be cowed by the theist's particularist propositions. If a theist responds to the problem of evil by appealing to a Kabbalistic metaphysics, cannot the atheist's next move be to raise objections to that metaphysics?

Thus, the religious authenticity of a given solution does not guarantee immunity from assessment from a standpoint external to the religion. On the other hand, someone who objects to a given theodicy cannot wander so far from the theist's proffered theodicy that the critic is really attacking central beliefs of a religion on some grounds other than the existence of evil. I am not sure where to draw the boundary that will pick out "wandering too far." In any event, theodicies can be constructed for two different audiences: theists and atheists. Religious thinkers who construct theodicies might focus on how evil can be explained to *themselves*, working within their tradition, and may be less interested in refuting outsiders than in helping insiders create a solution that coheres with their other beliefs.

The Jewish theodicies (and antitheodicies) that I present and assess here tend to be either weakly particularist or universalist. None are comparable in their particularism to, say, a Christian theodicy that draws on doctrines about Jesus's suffering on behalf of humanity (e.g., Adams 1990; see also Ekstrom, Chapter 18 in this volume). The theodicies I favor are not highly conspicuous in Jewish tradition, certainly not dominant, but they are present, and are *connected with* certain other traditional elements. A view I call "antitheodicy" – I shall disambiguate the term later (cf. Braiterman 1998, Fox 2003) – has deep roots in classical Judaism and may be more prevalent in Judaism than in Christianity. (On antitheodicy, see Chapters 25 and 26).

Before proceeding, we should note a few limitations of my discussion. First, even if Judaism has no special *answers* to the challenge of theodicy, it carries the burden of a special *question*. Time after time, God announces that He has a special relationship and covenant with the Jewish people; time after time, as the prophets and the psalmist and innumerable later authors painfully bemoan, He seems to break His promises and renege on the covenant. Over and over the Jewish people endure large-scale persecution and destruction. For Judaism, therefore, the problem is dual: one, evil to individuals and groups, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, and, two, evil to Jewish communities in particular. Post-Holocaust Jewish thought is especially rife with theologies that focus not just on evil per se (sufferings, deaths, and murders), but on the seemingly broken promise, and Jewish thought in general deals heavily with Jewish communal suffering and death.



Due to space limitations, I will not be able to enter into the topics of communal suffering and post-Holocaust theology except for a brief mention later, plus the following question. It is often thought that the Holocaust defies any and all prior theodicies; it is, people say, unique, and requires a unique solution. (The former does not entail the latter.) Others think, however – to the exact contrary – that the suffering or death of one innocent child poses just as large a problem as the slaughter of many millions. This latter contention, that nothing is new here, that magnitude of evil is irrelevant to theodicy, may appear to assume the so-called logical or deductive form of the problem of evil that was famously refuted by Nelson Pike and Alvin Plantinga (see Chapter 2). By contrast, it may appear that, if we adopt the evidential form of the problem – that the existence of evil makes the existence of God *unlikely* – the magnitude of the evil greatly intensifies the problem, because the thesis that the evil is justified becomes more improbable (see Chapter 4). But then again, maybe not: one may argue that the probability of a small amount of evil on the theistic hypothesis is just as low as that of much evil. It must be said, though, that discussing the atrocities of the Holocaust and other horrendous evils in these detached, mathematical terms may readily obscure their existential power and horror (cf. Adams 1990).

A second limitation to my discussion is that I cannot undertake a comprehensive survey of the rich Jewish treatments of evil through the ages. However, the ancient sources that classically were, and still are, vital in assessing Jewish authenticity – Bible, Talmud, and Midrash – generate a pool of approaches to evil that were elaborated and treated more rigorously in subsequent times.<sup>3</sup> The classic sources are not philosophical treatises. Theological views often have to be teased out of stories and anecdotes, and explicit theological statements in the classic sources tend to be pithy, aphoristic, ambiguous, cryptic, tantalizing, and contradictory – which makes interpretation immensely challenging and interesting.

Finally, while knowing that some Jewish sources say otherwise, I will assume here that there is a standard of goodness independent of God's will and God's approval, a position effectively argued for by Leibniz (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, 2). To add to Leibniz, "God saw that all He made was very good" (Genesis 1:31), says more than "God saw that He very much approved of what He had made."

## Retribution

Countless Jewish sources, beginning with the Bible, affirm that good deeds are rewarded in this world and bad ones punished. It is striking, therefore, that when a retributivist theodicy is stated by one rabbi in the Talmud in so many words – "There is no death without sin, no suffering without transgression" – the Talmud rejects his view (Babylonian Talmud [BT], *Shabbat* 55a). Many other theodicies are offered in classic sources.<sup>4</sup> Questions have been raised about the scope of the rejection of retributivism, since the "refuting text"

3 The Talmud and Midrash include interpretations of Scriptural law and narrative, but also present original legal, historical, and theological teachings, along with occasional musings and stories.

4 Nonetheless, there is a widespread tendency in Jewish writing to *equate* the problem of evil with "Why do the righteous endure evils and the wicked prosper?" This latter formulation focuses on what van Inwagen (2006) calls local evils, rather than on global evil. Rosenberg (1989) calls one the problem of evil, the other the problem of justice. For a parallel distinction in a Hindu framework, see the chapter by Purushottama Bilimoria in this volume.

states that four people died without sin. Was it *only* those four? And even if death is not always the result of sin, does the Talmud intend to extend the refutation from death to suffering? (See Shatz 2009b, 272 and the accompanying notes on 286–287.) Despite such questions, and even despite a Midrashic source in which the retributivist thesis, identically stated by the same sage, is voiced without refutation, the Babylonian Talmud's rejection of such a theodicy when it is stated sweepingly would make a Jew who accepts the Talmud's authority somewhat comfortable in rejecting a retributivist theodicy. Two caveats, however: (a) within classical Judaism, it would be absurd to deny that *some* suffering is punishment for sin; and (b) those who reject the retributivist theodicy are very likely to confine that rejection to *this* world – in the hereafter, all just deserts are meted out. The second of these caveats is illustrated by a view of Rabbi Jacob that “the reward for a commandment is not found in this world” but rather in the next (*Kiddushin* 39b). His statement was precipitated by the death of a child who fell off a ladder while the child was performing two commandments for which the Torah promises long life. Thus, empirical observation settled the matter for Rabbi Jacob – innocent people suffer in this world or die prematurely; so the biblical promise for the two commandments the child was performing, namely, “It will be good for you and your days will be lengthy,” must refer to the world to come.

Already a crucial *biblical* work registers a protest against the retributivist theodicy – and that is none other than the book of Job (see Chapter 26). Job's three friends have stood united in their insistence upon the traditional theodicy of justified retribution, and they therefore believe that, despite appearances, Job *must* be a sinner. Job, by contrast, stridently and consistently complains that his actions do not warrant his fate; he comes close to blasphemy. But in the final chapter, God chastises not Job, but the friends, because “you [the friends] did not speak properly to me as did my servant Job” (Job 42:7)! The friends deserve punishment for trying to defend God! Job – the one who did *not* accept their affirmations of divine justice – must pray on their behalf before they can be forgiven. A stronger indictment of the retributivist theodicy could hardly be imagined. As to *why* is God angry, perhaps it is because by implying that God would consider a man like Job deserving of his afflictions, the friends make God appear irrational and unethical, a wielder of absurd standards. (Tellingly, we know from the book's prologue that it is Job's righteousness, not his sins, that led to his suffering – because of God's wager with Satan, to which I will return.<sup>5</sup>) Let me add that Ecclesiastes, with typical pessimism, asserts that an identical fate awaits the righteous and the wicked (9:2).

The Bible and the Sages<sup>6</sup> thus observed that the retributivist theodicy does not coordinate with experience. In addition, retributivist theodicy can become an exercise in blaming the victim. If Hitler was *merely* God's instrument of retribution, would not that have to quiet our condemnation of him and elicit condemnation of those who perished? Granted, one could argue that we may still blame Hitler for his motivations.<sup>7</sup> But intuitively we blame him for far, far more: after all, do we really feel that he deserves only the level of

5 Often the prologue is thought to be tacked on to the book; my reading is integrative.

6 When capitalized, “the Sages” and “the Rabbis” are the standard scholarly terms for rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash.

7 See Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270), commentary to Genesis 15:14; see also 42:9. See also Genesis 45:5 and 50:20, where Joseph seems to excuse his brothers because they helped realize God's plan. (I do not think he is really doing so, however; rather, he is reassuring them that overall the consequences of their deeds were good.)

censure appropriate to someone whose actions produce what God wants but who has bad motives? Finally, if someone who suffers surely deserves to, why help or sympathize? These counterintuitive implications further undermine retributivist theodicies.

Nevertheless, we must ask: How would a Jewish thinker who rejects retributivism explain the many texts in the Talmud and countless later sources that mandate that, when people or communities are struck by suffering, they must “examine their deeds” and repent (e.g. *Berakhot* 5a)?<sup>8</sup> How can sufferers be so sure they have sinned, if we reject the retributivist theodicy? In reply, recent Jewish thinkers maintain that these sources are not urging the sufferer to find a causal account of his or her suffering, but to use the suffering as an opportunity for spiritual repair and improvement (e.g., Hartman 1985, 196). The person acts *as if* the suffering were punishment, and therefore scrutinizes his or her faults. I have dealt with this approach elsewhere – it is not easy to elucidate, and is not the texts’ obvious meaning – and touch on it later here (Shatz 2009a, 294–297; see also Stump 1997). Note, though, that Jewish texts which presuppose that suffering is retribution deal with *self*-examination. Talmudic sages strongly tend to attribute sins to *others* only if the sufferer *asks* them to explain the cause of the suffering. (See, e.g., *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 2, 38. See also Cohen 2000.)

### Atonement, Trial, Sufferings of Love

What theodicies are affirmed in ancient Judaism in addition to, or lieu of, a retributivist one? Yaakov Elman (1999) gives a lengthy list, which includes such ideas as *kapparah* (atonement), *nissayon* (a trial), and the notion that innocent individuals may get hurt because they are part of a group that is being punished or is in dangerous circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Later thinkers, primarily Kabbalists, utilized transmigration (i.e., those who suffer have been reincarnated and are being punished for sins committed in a previous existence), and Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) used, *inter alia*, a Neoplatonic evil-as-privation account. To my mind, the most interesting concept in Jewish discussions of suffering is “tribulations of love” (*Berakhot* 5a). Normally, this concept is interpreted as follows: God makes (or one might say allows) the righteous to suffer in this world in order to increase their reward in the next.<sup>10</sup> (Possibly, God is punishing them in this world for their minor sins so that they can be given only rewards in the next; in addition, possibly He repairs, via this suffering, a defect that led to a sin.) But there is a minority understanding of “tribulations of love” (and of a “trial”) that obviates reference to otherworldly reward and is a variant of the soul-making theodicy (SMT). Because the righteous are righteous, God gives them an opportunity – as a privilege, a benefit, a reward – to connect to God even more closely through suffering, or to display further virtue: the virtue of faith, of acceptance of God’s will, of loving God. On the verge of being executed by the Romans for teaching Torah, the sage Rabbi Akiva is said to have been joyful over the opportunity to fulfill the command-

8 See also Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Fasts 1.

9 I thank Jerome Gellman for highlighting sources expressing this last idea.

10 Maimonides rejected this notion; see *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:17.

ment to “Love God *with all of your soul*” – that is, love Him even when your soul will be taken (Jerusalem Talmud, *Sotah* 5:5).

This theodicy involves a move we may call the axiological shift. If a feeling of closeness to God, or faith and strength of spirit, or love of God, or knowledge of God, are greater goods than material welfare, then the problem of evil dissipates; and the sufferer achieves tranquility through adopting this perspective (see Chapter 15). “As for me, the nearness of God – that is the good” (Psalms 73:28). An axiological shift was also employed by Maimonides (1138–1204),<sup>11</sup> and the approach calls to mind the memorable thesis of Epictetus that what upsets people’s minds is not events but rather their *judgments* on events (*Enchiridion* 5).<sup>12</sup>

The axiological-shift theodicy, however, does not readily apply to children, nonhuman animals, and adults lacking certain capacities; furthermore, it would make evils that destroy the capacity for morally significant behavior even more difficult for a theist to explain. Thus, the axiological-shift theodicy cannot be a *comprehensive* one; it must be complemented by other theodicies. Still another problem is that if material goods are not important and (various) spiritual ones are (closeness to God, and so on; this “good,” incidentally, makes for a weakly particularist theodicy), then just as we should value suffering in our own case, we should do so in the case of *other* sufferers. But this, objectionably, weakens our duty to relieve physical suffering experienced by others – and even grants license to actively make them suffer to achieve spiritual goods. Further, as Daniel Rynhold observed, the shift gestures toward asceticism – a fact that would give some Jewish theodacists pause, since, despite the presence of ascetic approaches in the tradition, Judaism generally bids human beings to enjoy God’s material world. Admittedly, in the Talmudic stories concerning “tribulations of love” (*Berakhot* 5a–b), some Sages prefer relief from such tribulations to the rewards they bring, suggesting that an individual’s axiology must be respected even if it is less than ideal. But still, why one should relieve the suffering of those who *are* accepting their tribulations? However, the problem at hand affects all SMTs that posit soulmaking benefits for those who suffer and not only for people who provide aid (see Chapter 14). The Jewish theodicy under consideration does not here encounter a *special* challenge.

An additional question about the axiological shift is this. Even though Rabbi Akiva viewed his imminent death as a means of fulfilling the love of God, it seems plausible that he should not court or seek out such circumstances. But why not, if love of God is the highest value? Well, for one thing, too many lives would be lost if proactive martyrdom were encouraged; further, not everyone who courts the circumstances will react with love when the moment for martyrdom actually arrives. In addition, an analogous objection could be raised against all SMTs that include benefits for the sufferer (e. g., why not seek out suffering that will call for courage?). Once again, the axiological-shift theodicy is not in a *special* difficulty.

11 See *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:23 (on Job). Maimonides takes human beings’ preoccupation with human suffering and death as indicative of an anthropocentric orientation, and also asserts that humans bring evils upon themselves. See *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:12.

12 Other chapters in this part of the book reflect axiological shifts in the context of other religions. See Ekstrom’s “divine intimacy” Christian theodicy, along with Mohammed Mobini’s description of epistemic benefits in his essay on Islamic theodicies (Chapters 18 and 20, respectively).

## Mazzal

Perhaps the most startling Talmudic statement on theodicy is that “Length of life, children and sustenance depend not on one’s merit but on *mazzala* [astrological influence]” (*Moed Katan* 28a). Here the sage Rava removes these three important types of goods or tribulations from the realm of direct divine activity and places them in the hands of what were in his time considered the laws of nature. Rava came to his view by contrasting the radically different lives of two equally righteous sages with regard to the three goods he named. Although Rava here provides a *causal explanation* of tribulations, his view is not a justification of God’s ways. For he does not explain, as a theodist would, *why* God runs the world in this way – why does He not distribute longevity, children, and sustenance based on merit, instead of letting nature take its course? Like the aforementioned Rabbi Jacob, who saw an innocent child fall and die, Rava was persuaded by experience to abandon (in certain areas) a retributivist theodicy.

Most likely discomfited by Rava’s semi-naturalistic approach, and buttressed by another Talmudic discussion (BT *Shabbat* 156a), some commentators posit that a righteous person can override the constellations by good deeds. But if good deeds override the constellations, why did not the two sages whose lives Rava compared enjoy identical boons? Both Rava’s and Rabbi Jacob’s dicta open up space in Judaism for a theodicy that views God as an infrequent intervener in this world – even though neither sage explains *why* God restrains Himself, but only gives evidence *that* He restrains Himself, and even though their views do not *entail* that He does not intervene much in nature. A metaphysics that allows little divine intervention gains considerable Jewish authenticity from the large degree of naturalism in medieval Jewish philosophy, for example, in Maimonides. Some thinkers restricted direct divine reward and punishment in this world to a small group – the exceptionally righteous and the exceptionally wicked – and even those exceptions were explained in a sense naturally. (See Berger 2011.)

## Kabbalistic Views

Kabbalah – Jewish mystical thought – comes in highly diverse versions. Among its alternatives: there is a power that opposes God (and emerged from God); quite the opposite – evil is an illusion; transmigration; and evil as privation.

Having given the lay of the land, I want now to devote special attention to what I regard as one of the two strongest theodicies from a philosophical standpoint – the SMT. (The other strong theodicy is the free will theodicy.) I will not argue for SMT’s cogency but rather for its Jewishness. After that I turn to the anti-theodicy position prevalent in recent times.

## Soul-Making Theodicy

The free will and SMTs are controversial in Jewish tradition because they typically limit divine interventions in the world (see Chapter 14). However, certain traditional texts embrace SMTs more or less directly. I will not explore the free will theodicy but will examine an SMT that values *free* virtuous responses, even though one could maintain SMT

even in a deterministic system (as Aaron Segal noted). Later, we will see that SMTs are a consequence of antitheodicy as well.<sup>13</sup>

The closest explicit fits I know of in Jewish tradition to SMT are certain understandings of “tribulations of love” or “trial.” Some medieval and early modern authors suggest that the suffering of the righteous – divinely inflicted – builds character, or cleanses the righteous of physicality, or distances them from the physical in some way, enhancing their spiritual orientation (for references, see Shatz 2009a 301, note 10; see also Stump 1997 on Saadyah Gaon). The first process of improvement seems to involve free choice (of actions that build good character); the other two do not.

These are not SMTs in the sense intended by most contemporary philosophers. First, SMTs normally justify God’s *allowing* suffering, not, as in the present suggestions, actively *inflicting* it. Second, the philosophers’ SMTs are not targeted at the sufferings of the righteous in particular – rather, the world runs mostly by virtue-indifferent natural laws. The feeling of closeness to God through suffering is not personal when the suffering is brought on by natural law rather than by God’s hands, though the natural law approach seems less problematic morally. Third, as we saw, some of the soul-making in the Jewish sources is not freely willed (instead, God purges people of physicality). Still and all, we have a close enough fit to furnish a potential precedent for a contemporary-style SMT. Suffering also can lead to growth naturalistically by, for example, creating empathy, puncturing illusions of power, bringing people closer to God (Soloveitchik 2002, 131–132) and, on occasion, making sufferers realize that they have brought adversity upon themselves by poor choices or deficient self-control.

I suggest that a crucial element of the SMT appears in Job. For one message of the book, I believe, is that suffering can improve a person spiritually and morally. At the end of the book, Job explicitly states, “I had heard you with my ears, but now I see you with my eyes” (42:5). Surely this verse – he now *sees* God – intimates a sharpened religious perception; perhaps we should infer that this perception was created by suffering. Moreover, at the end of the book, Job prays for his rebuked friends, and does not (as in the prologue) act for his family alone (Soloveitchik 1992, 60–61). He has thus grown morally as well as religiously. On this approach, the book expresses a claim that is integral to the “SMT” – suffering promotes virtue. Without this understanding, what is the big mystery of Job’s suffering? We *know* why he’s suffering – God and Satan made a bet! But the bet in the prologue was about what the effects of suffering will be on Job – and the point, on my reading, is that God won. To be sure, we should distinguish, as Shalom Carmy put it to me, between affirming the *benefits* of suffering and affirming a *justification* of suffering, and I am not sure which the book is doing. It is certainly more interested in the psyche of the suffering believer than in philosophical problems. But the former claim *contributes to* a theodicy even if by itself it does not *constitute* a theodicy.

What we walk away with from our survey-*cum*-analysis of classic Jewish sources is that, although retributivist themes are very common, there is precedent for all of the following:

13 A free will theodicy sees the exercise of free will as good in itself; the SMT I consider sees freely willed *virtuous* responses as good, but freely willed *vicious* responses are of value only if the SMT is supplemented by a general high evaluation of free will.

- Denying that all suffering and death is punishment for sin.
- Explaining evils (some or perhaps many) by reference to laws of nature.<sup>14</sup>
- Embracing the core claim of the SMT that evil promotes certain virtues. (Philosophers argue that evil is *logically necessary* for the development of certain virtues.)

From these elements I think we can construct a SMT for Judaism that satisfies the constraints of both connectedness to Jewish tradition and philosophical cogency (though I have not here argued for cogency). Because relating to God is one good effect of suffering, a benefit that atheists could not possibly recognize but other religions can and do, the theodicy is in that detail weakly particularist. (See also Birnbaum 1986.)

One seemingly “maverick” element in a Jewish SMT pertains to Jewish eschatology. If the messianic age will be marked by peace, righteousness, and religious devotion there will be no evil from which to make souls: no challenges to faith, no opportunity to relieve suffering, and possibly no chance of relating more closely to God via suffering. Why pray for such a time? By way of response, it could be that this eschatology is Judaism’s way of acknowledging conflicting pulls in deciding whether soul-making outweighs suffering – it assigns different weightings in different epochs; or it could be that since it is through righteous conduct that people have brought the world to the stage of peace, righteousness and religious devotion, therefore that peace takes on special value; or that other opportunities for soul-making will present themselves in the *eschaton*; or that the negative value of evil in human history will, by messianic times, outweigh the positive value of soul-making, and so in messianic times, evil must be drastically cut back. All in all, though, there is a tension between SMT and eschatology.

## Antitheodicy: The “Halakhic” or Existentialist Response

A major medieval Jewish figure, Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270), in his *The Instruction of Man*, declared that religious people who object to seeking theodicies are “fools who despise wisdom.” When people justify God’s ways, he argues, God’s justice becomes entrenched in their minds, and they achieve serenity and secure belief. Individuals therefore are duty bound to theoditize. (It may seem that Nahmanides’ rationale for theoditizing would not require a theodicitist to have a *correct* theodicy – only one that makes the theodicitist *believe* that God is just and that thereby breeds serenity. But Nahmanides values truth, too.)

There is in Judaism, however, a prominent opposite perspective to Nahmanides’ – “Antitheodicy.” Sometimes philosophers use this term to denote the atheistic view that all theodicies, proffered and unproffered, fail; there is unjustified evil. It may also refer to the *theistic* view that human beings cannot know the true reason why God allows evil. I will be using it in a third way, to refer to the theistic view that it is irrational, unethical, or inappropriate for theists even to *seek* theodicies. (See also Hick 1978, 6–11, who I believe coined the term “antitheodicy.”)

At the heart of antitheodicy thus defined is this question: What should theists do if, for them, seeking a theodicy is pointless, or instills a bad attitude, or distracts them from activities that are more valuable? What if it is, from his or her vantage point, irrational or unethical for a theist to seek a solution? The antitheodicitist argues that in these circum-

14 Of course human free choice is another recognized explanation.



stances, theists should eschew theodicies. Antitheodicy emphasizes responding to evil as opposed to theorizing about why it exists. Our reaction to evil must be to combat it, to relieve suffering, and to repair our faults, not to theorize about why evil is there. "We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty, but rather about the path wherein man shall walk when suffering strikes . . ." (Soloveitchik 2002, 156). The fundamental question is not why people suffer, but rather "What obligation does suffering impose upon man?" (Soloveitchik 2000, 56) In short, "Response, not explanation, is focal" (Lichtenstein 1999; see also Carmy 1999). "Responses" here obviously denote responses other than theorizing. (See Sokol 2007.)

I turn to a critical, nonexhaustive examination of arguments for an antitheodic perspective. Perhaps because of the massive amount of suffering in the Jewish experience, there may be more appeals to ignorance in Jewish approaches to evil than in Christian ones (a possibility pointed out to me by Aaron Segal). The Holocaust has intensified the trend not to construct theodicies, and that trend has been bolstered still more by the general antimetaphysical predilections of certain Jewish philosophers, trained in Continental philosophy, who address religious phenomenology and behavior instead of metaphysics. (Cf. however, Berkovits's (1973) development of a free will theodicy to explain the Holocaust.)

### *The objection from arrogance*

C. S. Lewis spoke of atheists placing "God in the dock" (Lewis 1994). But some theists find it arrogant not only for atheists to *prosecute* God in the dock, but also for theists to *defend* him in the dock. Theists, goes the argument, must not *judge* God: *we* stand before *Him* in judgment, not the other way around. Additionally, it is arrogant even to try to read God's mind: "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways high above your ways and my thoughts above yours" (Isaiah 55:9). Accepting that God is good and just, without trying to fathom His ways and judge them, exhibits proper humility.

The arrogance objection cannot easily be sustained, however:

- (a) Great sages of Jewish tradition *have* given theodicies; surely a religious Jew would not want to brand all these sages as arrogant. In fact, in Talmudic and Midrashic sources, biblical figures *challenge* God with impunity, speaking in "the audacious language of anger and demand" (Braiterman 1998, 32). Jeremiah, the Rabbis say, refused to praise God with the formula introduced by Moses – "great, mighty, and awesome" – because the Temple had been taken over by Israel's enemies and the people were enslaved; he dropped the word "awesome". Daniel omitted "mighty" (See BT *Yoma* 69b). Would not giving a theodicy be acceptable *a fortiori*? Perhaps the Sages at times legitimized reactions like Jeremiah's because they found them so understandable, so natural, so difficult to resist, and recognized that they come from a place of empathy, from devotion to the Temple and the people, and from moral sensitivity. Cannot theodicies, too, arise from noble motives? (To be sure, in one text, when Moses asks why Rabbi Akiva, whose future suffering is revealed to him, will undergo such torment, God silences Moses (*Menahot* 29b).)
- (b) Believers normally do not fault someone who attributes to God thoughts, desires, and intentions that human beings consider *good*, and who try to show *in specific* that "all that God does is for the good" (*Berakhot* 60b). Is that not to read God's mind – maybe even to judge Him? Why not read His mind in a theodicy?

- (c) Van Inwagen (2006) and others distinguish defenses from theodicies. A theodicy is a story that is claimed by the storyteller to be the truth about why God allows evil (or specific evils); a defense is a story that the defender merely maintains *could* be true for all we know, and the epistemic possibility of which makes the prosecutor's argument fail. Theodicies profess to read God's mind; defenses do not, and so (since defenses do not judge what God *actually* does) defenses are not subject to the arrogance objection. Why then, asks the critic of antitheodicy, can theists not at least offer a defense?

Perhaps antitheodic theists will reply that defenses are not really less arrogant than theodicies. When someone who believes that *p* has evidence against *p*, and can think of only one scenario in which *p* would be the case despite the evidence, that gives the person reason to think that the scenario actually obtains.<sup>15</sup> We reason this way all the time. Thus, the defense/theodicy distinction collapses (McBrayer 2010),<sup>16</sup> and, says the antitheodicist, it is arrogant to construct a defense and not only arrogant to construct a theodicy.

But even if a defense tacitly implies a theodicy – in which case, if giving theodicies is wrong, so is giving defenses – we have not shaken off replies (a) and (b) to the arrogance objection: Reading and judging God's thoughts, even challenging God, are not per se objectionable. What a theodicist should also say in response to the arrogance objection is this: there are cases and there are cases. The arrogance objection is right that one's approach to theodicy can *sometimes* reflect a religiously objectionable attitude, for example, judging God. But others might be humbly seeking understanding of His ways, just as they do by trying to find teleology in the physical universe. There is no good across-the-board objection to producing theodicies – it all depends on attitude. Theodicists must approach the project with a consciousness of human fallibility and a measure of trepidation. Establishing the religious permissibility of trying to read and judge God's mind requires that the theodicist privilege some sources over others, but privileging is inevitable in a rich and complex religious tradition.<sup>17</sup>

### *The objection from futility*

Notwithstanding Jewish theodicies we have canvassed, a Talmudic passage relates that even Moses was not told why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper (*Berakhot* 7a; see also *Menahot* 29b). That we are ignorant of the reasons for evil, in fact are unable to know them, is rooted in other sources too (e.g., *Avot* 4:19; for further discussion, see Fox 2003 and Braiterman 1998, chapter 3). The standard interpretation of Job (as distinct from the soul-making interpretation mentioned earlier) runs along these lines: God overpowers Job by showing him the puniness of his understanding as compared with God's. Thus, the

15 Assuming that skeptical theism is not being invoked here.

16 Justin McBrayer also questions the distinction (McBrayer 2010). As Aaron Segal noted, my point would not apply to someone who thought up multiple defenses but did not profess to know which one is true. As I say next, however, even if a defense does not imply a theodicy, the antitheodicist has a response.

17 It might also be argued that thinking about possible reasons for evil – the subjective experience itself – is valuable regardless of the truth of the resulting theodicy.

futility of theodicy is firmly rooted in classical Jewish sources. Antitheodicy ostensibly prevails.

Proclaiming such ignorance of God's reasons, however, confronts a familiar objection. If we cannot figure out God's reasons, we must be very bad at ethics – after all, evils that look to us clearly, even self-evidently, unjustified must in truth be justified, since God allows them. Hence, we face skepticism about our trusting our moral judgments: Would you use a calculator to solve complex multiplication problems if it has yielded wrong answers to what seem like far simpler questions? Even where relieving suffering is not at issue, but instead we confront quandaries about truth-telling, impartiality, equality, and tolerance, perhaps we must take our ability at moral reasoning to be faulty.<sup>18</sup> Granted, God presumably has a good reason not just for allowing evil but also for not explaining why He allows evil; perhaps, for example, His principles are so complex that we would make too many mistakes if we tried to apply His standards (just as a utilitarian may say that it would be disastrous if people knew utilitarianism is true, because they would miscalculate consequences). But this just reinforces skeptical theism – even if we knew God's reasons, we would err in decision-making (see Chapter 29).

Ira Schnall (2007) has suggested, however, that, because of a specific feature of Judaism, Judaism can turn back this challenge to skeptical theism. For Jewish ethics is derived from God's commands, and God commands us (for example) to save life whenever we can, regardless of any philosophical considerations that might make us hesitate or decide otherwise. Judaism's adherents can therefore have confidence that they ought to relieve suffering and save lives whenever they can. Schnall cites several biblical laws to show that Scripture mandates that humans relieve suffering.

As Schnall also indicates, however, in his example of a physician having biblical license to heal, the interpretation of Jewish law is decided by rabbinic authorities. (See Deuteronomy 17:8–11.) But rabbis are human; so why, given skeptical theism, should they and their disciples trust their determinations of right and wrong? The skeptical theist may retort in turn either that skepticism about the rabbis' *interpretive skills* in law is not warranted, or that God commands Jews to follow rabbinic determinations even if rabbis do not arrive at the law that God believes is correct (*Bava Metzi'a* 59a). At times, let me add, Judaism calls upon rabbis to use their independent *ethical* judgments to make *legal* judgments. They and their "constituencies" have divine permission to trust those judgments, whatever reason God has for that permission. Hence, ignorance of God's reasons for allowing evil does not leave human beings in the dark about how to act, and the claim of futility may be salvaged.

Some may reject this version of skeptical theism because it focuses on heteronomous acceptance of divine commands; some will be baffled by why God issues commands (to relieve suffering) that He Himself does not obey. While these concerns can probably be allayed, the futility argument is only as good as its premise that we cannot hit upon a cogent theodicy. That assumption is shaky. Let us turn, therefore, to a final antitheodic argument.

18 Some philosophers go further and argue that skeptical theism casts doubts on our cognitive equipment more generally. See Chapters 29 and 31.

### *The objection from moral complacency*

The next antitheodic argument is that asking “Why am I suffering?” hurts us because (i) it makes us feel we are living an existence of “fate,” in which outside circumstances control us, rather than an existence of “destiny” in which we are not objects but rather freely willing subjects (Soloveitchik 2000); (ii) theodicies distract us from moral action. For suppose I have a particular theodicy *T*. If *T* is correct, why should I battle evil? Emmanuel Levinas (2007, 453) thus writes: “the justification of the neighbor’s pain is certainly the source of all immorality.” It would seem that the aim of theodicy is to make peace with evil – whereas the aim of moral agency and halakhic action, the action dictated by Jewish law, is to make war on evil. Theodicy, goes the objection, spells quietism and moral complacency. In this form, the existentialist response has been called the halakhic response to evil and has been thought to be strongly particularist. It does not strike me this way, though, since other religions and also atheists agree that people are obligated to relieve suffering; it is just that the details of laws concerning humans’ treatment of one another are so minutely developed in Jewish law.

The concern over complacency has been framed vividly by Lord Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. Rabbi Sacks draws upon a homiletic idea of his teacher Rabbi Nahum Rabinowich, one focused on Moses’s encounter with God at the burning bush.

“Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6). Why was he afraid? Because if he were fully to understand God he would have no choice but to be reconciled to the slavery and oppression of the world. From the vantage point of eternity, he would see that the bad is a necessary stage on the journey to the good. He would understand God but he would cease to be Moses, the fighter against injustice who intervened whenever he saw wrong being done. “He was afraid” that seeing heaven would desensitize him to earth, that coming close to infinity would mean losing his humanity’ (Sacks 2005, 22–23)

I am reminded of the quip: “If the world were perfect, it wouldn’t be perfect.” Knowing God’s reasons, it is said, would lead us to abandon the fight against evil. Soloveitchik similarly argues that, whereas theodicies view evils as a necessary part of a greater good, the Halakhah views evil “as a dreadful fiend with whom no pact may be reached, no reconciliation is possible” (Soloveitchik 2002, 101). Judaism, says Soloveitchik, oddly muting the many theodic parts of the tradition, has an “ethic of suffering,” but not a “metaphysic of suffering,” because a metaphysic of suffering implants moral complacency.

We need not review our earlier discussion of how humans can trust their moral judgments given that God allows evils for reasons unknown, and of how God could allow evils given what He himself commands. The complacency argument seems weak on other grounds. First, is it not a *problem* that Jewish law demands that people do things that make no sense according to Jewish theology? Second, the complacency argument seems to be saying at least one of the following:

- (1) A person’s having a theodicy psychologically precludes, or at least reduces the likelihood of, that person’s engaging in moral action.
- (2) Having a correct theodicy logically precludes, or at least reduces the rationality of, a person’s engaging in moral action.

I know of no empirical evidence for either disjunct in (1) and much empirical evidence against them. Religious people perform great acts of charity and benevolence, even though many have their own theodicies. Moreover, it seems that if (1) is true, it is not just *having* a theodicy that would preclude or render unlikely theodacists' engaging in moral action, but even *believing that there is some unknown justification for evil*. It would be difficult to find a traditional theist who did not believe *that*.<sup>19</sup>

Nor is (2) correct. For what if the reason that God allows evils is, precisely, to enable human beings to engage in moral action? For someone who holds this theodicy, moral action would not only not be precluded by theodicy but would be mandated by it. Indeed, the complacency argument eventually *motivates* such a theodicy. For suppose we start by saying, with Sacks, that the world is really perfect, but then we add, "God wants humans to act to remove evil anyway." How shall we understand this? Would it not be irrational and unethical for God to risk human beings messing up His perfect world? Rather, it is better to hold that God deliberately leaves the world *imperfect* because part of its hoped-for perfection is that humans participate in making it better – they are "partners in the work of creation" (*Midrash Tanhuma* to Leviticus 12:3). In short, the best way to both have a theodicy and engage in moral action is to develop a theodicy where the very reason for evil is one that encourages moral action. An SMT (and a free will theodicy, suitably formulated) fits that bill. Converting antitheodicy into a theodicy of this sort can also explain the disconnect between God's ways and our own, because theodacists have supplied reasons for the disconnect. (See Dore 1970.)

Apropos our earlier discussion of soul-making, we have found another route to a SMT in Jewish tradition besides looking for explicit statements: Derive it from what initially looks like another approach, namely, antitheodicy. If I am correct, the antitheodacist's insight in the complacency argument – that the fact human beings must engage in moral action sits at odds with the idea that all evil is justified – can be explained only if we embrace a certain type of theodicy.<sup>20</sup>

## Summary

Different theologians have different religious sensibilities, and each privileges different texts in authenticating the Jewishness of his or her approach. Classic Jewish sources allow the rejection of retributivist theodicies, even though when adversity strikes, the sufferer should use that occasion to mend his or her ways. Some sources also allow a large enough scope to natural law to allow for a SMT, and such a theodicy has some support in classic sources. Finally, antitheodic approaches are difficult to establish, and when driven by the complacency argument, collapse into theodicies. The latter are weakly particularist if they include the goods of relating to God and faith in God. The soul-making and free will theodicies are strongly particularist not at their core but only in the sense that Halakhah's providing laws to cover all situations gives a more complete statement of interpersonal obligations and virtues, covering myriad closely defined situations, than do other religions.

19 I assume antitheodacists will not claim that the existence of some (unknown) justification for evil precludes moral action, since theists believe there is *some* such justification yet engage in moral action.

20 Nick Markakis also explores antitheodicy in Chapter 24, which includes additional references.

We have seen, finally, that one thing Jewish tradition contributes to the problem of evil is a large number of vivid aphorisms, stories, disputes, homilies, and dialectical discussions that enrich the abstract formulations of philosophers – and bring to the fore not one but the many sides of the problem of evil.

## Acknowledgments

My thanks go to Daniel Rynhold, Aaron Segal, and two anonymous readers for valuable comments on an earlier draft, and to Yitzchak Blau, Shalom Carmy, Jonathan Dauber, Jerome Gellman, and Paul Reinstein for helpful correspondence and conversation.

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# Feminism and the Problem of Evil

BEVERLEY CLACK

## Introduction

That feminists have something distinctive to say about the problem of evil and suffering can sound strange to philosophical ears. Confronted with the extent of suffering in the world, and the reality of human wickedness, exemplified in sickening acts of brutality, seeking a feminist analysis can seem at best irrelevant, at worst a distraction. There are few things that we can say with certainty about human experience, but it would seem that the experience of suffering – whether arising from natural forces or from human action – is something that unites all, regardless of their gender.

Feminists have challenged this claim, and this chapter considers a range of approaches offered by feminists to the problem of evil. Exploring these feminist perspectives enables a further feature to come to light: feminist theories invariably return to the practical solutions that might be made to evil and suffering in our world. This emphasis challenges the traditional focus of theodicy, but it also raises a question about philosophical engagements with evil more generally: to what extent are the kinds of responses that philosophers might make to the horrors of evil capable of ameliorating the experience of suffering? For feminists suggest that in approaching the problem of evil, the emphasis should be less on theodical questions of how evil and God might coexist – or be shown to be incompatible – and more on drawing attention to ethical questions of how to live in a world that can be experienced as harsh and uncaring.

## Defining Feminism

At the outset, it is important to recognize that feminism does not take only one form: different schools of thought make up the diversity of feminist perspectives. In contemporary feminism, the most obvious distinction lies between those committed to advancing the

cause of equality, and those who seek to focus on sexual difference as a way of valuing what is viewed as the *distinctive* experience of women. We will see how this difference in emphasis influences the way in which different feminists approach the problem of evil.

Yet despite such different theoretical perspectives, there remains a common concern. Feminism is first and foremost a political movement concerned to expose and correct the marginalization of women's lives and experiences and to address gender injustice. Both difference and equality feminisms engage to varying extents in forms of analysis connected to what Pamela Sue Anderson calls "the lived experience" of women (Anderson 1998). By addressing the injustice and oppression that women have experienced throughout human history – and, indeed, continue to experience today – the feminist goal is to advocate ways of organizing society that enable more just ways of living that promote the flourishing of all human beings.

Connecting theory and practice in this way leads to a particular approach to some of the key assumptions made in philosophy and theology. Ideas are not without an impact on the way in which the world is perceived and society structured. And this has particular implications for women's lives. Recognizing this connection has led some feminists to focus their attention on exposing often unacknowledged misogyny in theological and philosophical theorizing. Far from being purely theoretical musings, negative theological and philosophical statements about the nature of "Woman" affect the position of women in both religious and secular society (Lloyd 1984; Clack 1999). Recognizing this connection makes exposing theological and philosophical misogyny a vital practice for preparing the ground for fresh feminist arguments that take their starting place from women's lives and experiences.

Feminism is, then, denoted by a dual political and intellectual movement, and it is this interplay that lies beneath the range of feminist engagements with the problem of evil. For some feminists, the primary task is to challenge the habitual formulation of the problem in the discourse of theodicians (Jantzen 1998, 263–264; Joy 2010). As antitheodicians similarly argue, the theodicy shapes the problem of evil as a puzzle that needs to be solved (Surin 1986; Clack 2007). For it to be convincing, a theodicy must maintain belief in the good, all-powerful and all-knowing God of theism in the face of the experience of evil and suffering. In seeking to balance these apparently contradictory claims, theodicians provide a *metaphysical* account of evil: evil can be justified by explaining the role it plays in the structure of God's creation (see Chapter 12).

While there may be much to commend the rigor with which theodicians go about this task, questions might be raised as to what, ultimately, it achieves. And here tensions arise between different views about the goal of philosophical practice. Mary Midgley argues that the problem with the theodical approach – regardless of how convincing any particular theodicy appears to be – is that it fails to confront the reality of human wickedness as it is experienced in the world (Midgley 1984, 1–2). Evil is and remains a problem whether or not a solution is found that enables the existence of God to be held in tension with the reality of evil and suffering. For Midgley, theodicies ignore the real force of how the problem is felt in life, and she directs attention away from the metaphysics of evil to the ethical question of human wickedness, and particularly how it might be identified and combated.

We might feel unsure as to the criticism being made of theodicy here: after all, the theodicy makes clear their starting point; who is to say that considering the concept of God necessarily excludes further discussion of the practical implications of any particular

theodicy? That may well be so, yet as Terrence Tilley (1991) and Kenneth Surin suggest, there tends to be a distinction between theoretical accounts which focus on the problem evil poses for God and accounts that engage more directly with practical concerns of how to respond to suffering. Feminists may come to different conclusions about how to proceed, but their commitments invariably lead them to practical concerns. Exploring how they do this opens up the subject in surprising – and sometimes disquieting – ways.

## Women and Evil

Common philosophical practice draws a distinction between “evil” on the one hand and “suffering” on the other. Evil refers to the metaphysical dimension; the structures of the universe; or, put more simply, the way the world “really” is. Suffering, on the other hand, denotes the *experience* that comes about either through exposure to what philosophers call “natural” or “physical” phenomena like disease, volcanoes, earthquakes, or through the moral failure of human individuals. In recent years, secularists have challenged the propriety of using the word “evil” at all. To talk of “evil” assumes the existence of absolute values transcending the human world with which many are now uncomfortable. In practice, the two terms are frequently blurred in the writings of philosophers of religion and theologians; not surprisingly, given that both themes challenge belief in the God defined according to the tenets of theism.

An analysis of the definition of evil has led some feminists to draw attention to the role the category “Woman” plays in western forms of its construction. Defining evil as that which stands in opposition to God or the Good reflects a dualistic construction of human experience with a long inheritance. This dualistic framework is not without implications for the way in which men and women have been understood and their aptitudes defined. Grace Jantzen shows this by tracing this oppositional structure back to Plato’s dualistic account of the universe, which itself depends on categories developed by Pythagoras. According to Aristotle’s table of Pythagorean opposites, “limit,” “odd,” “one,” “right,” “male,” “resting,” “straight,” “light,” “good,” and “square” were understood in opposition to that which was “unlimited,” “even,” “plural,” “left,” “female,” “moving,” “curved,” “darkness,” “bad,” and “oblong” (Jantzen 1995, 32). Jantzen highlights the implications of these categories for how male and female are understood. The male is associated with implicitly good qualities, while the female is associated with all that is considered bad.

In Plato’s hands, a further dimension is added. The body and that which is physical is associated with the female, while the mind and that which is spiritual is associated with the male. Given that Plato’s aim for the philosopher was to transcend the flesh, the implications this has for women are profound. In the *Symposium*, the lowest form of love is love of man for woman, for all that can come out of such a union are more beings destined for death; only in the love of man for man are the “eternal children of the mind” (the ideas that lead to wisdom and the Good) capable of being created (*Symposium* 205b–209a). Connecting women with the passing nature of this world is reiterated in the account given of Socrates’ death. He rebukes his grieving supporters, saying that only women should fear death, the implication being that women’s fear results from their intimate connection to the physical world, itself destined to decay and death (*Phaedo* 117d–e).

The reversal of value implicit in Plato’s philosophy is noteworthy: not least for the effect it has on women. Their reproductive function ties them to the world of representations

and death; as Val Plumwood comments, that which is valued is now “the lifeless world of the Forms [which] gives eternal life, [while] the living world of nature is called a tomb” (Plumwood 1993, 97). Given this rejection of the physical world and woman’s connection with it, it is difficult to think of women as philosophers. Incapable of transcending the world of the flesh and mere appearance, they fail to have the necessary detachment for cultivating philosophical reflection. Little wonder, given this vision of what philosophy involves, that women have struggled to find a place for themselves in the history of philosophy.

If woman emerges as something base in Plato’s thought, a similar movement permeates the Christian tradition. The suspicion surrounding femaleness is given a new twist with the interpretations of the biblical story of Eve, which came to the fore during the period when the Church sought to establish its theology. While the account of the fall of humanity in Genesis 1–3 apports blame to both partners, in the works of these early church fathers, emphasis is placed firmly on Eve’s responsibility. It is through Eve’s successful temptation of Adam that death, suffering, and expulsion from the idyllic Garden of Eden come about. For influential theologians like Tertullian (circa 160–225CE), this dreadful punishment is the responsibility of *all* women, who he describes as “daughters of Eve.” Eve is no longer an individual accountable for her own actions but representative of all women who must share her ignominy (Pagels 1989, 63–68).

This is a significant move that impacts upon the way evil is understood and constructed. There is something about woman’s essential character – traced back to the first mother – which means she is always more open to the forces of evil than her male counterpart. Her nature cannot be escaped. She is, according to Aquinas, a male *manqué* or “a defective male” (*Summa Theologiae* 1a. 92, 1). Read against the backdrop of Augustine’s theory of evil as that which lacks of goodness (*City of God*, book 11, chapter 22), a further connection is established between women and evil. Defined in terms of lack or defect, woman in her very being is connected to evil in a way in which man is not. Such thinking goes some way to explaining the weird piece of doggerel by J.K. Stephens cited by Nel Noddings in her *Women and Evil*:

If all the harm that women have done  
Were put in a bundle and rolled into one,  
Earth would not hold it  
The sky could not enfold it,  
It could not be lighted nor warmed by the sun.  
Such masses of evil  
Would puzzle the devil  
And keep him in fuel while Time’s wheels run.  
But if all the harm that’s been done by men  
Were doubled and doubled and doubled again,  
And melted and fused into vapour and then  
Were squared and raised to the power of ten,  
There wouldn’t be nearly enough, not near  
To keep a small girl for the tenth of a year.  
(in Noddings 1989, 35)

Such sentiments might well be dismissed as a crude attempt at humor, but considered against the backdrop of this philosophical and theological inheritance, there is a certain

logic to it. No matter that a quantitative analysis could establish the male role in atrocities to have been far greater, historically, than that of the female. This poem is not concerned with offering an accurate reflection of the acts of real women. What it reveals, instead, is a perception of the essence of femaleness derived from that philosophical and theological inheritance. It also does more than that, for what it reveals is the impact such theorizing has on the practical ordering of society. If women are viewed in this way, it is a relatively easy step to conclude that for there to be a safe, ordered society, they must be subject to patriarchal control. Eve's crime stands as a compelling example of what happens if they are not.

Tracing the development of the figure of Eve reveals a further aspect in the history of Western discourse about evil. As the story of the fall takes on more weight in the tradition, Eve's sin is described in increasingly sexual ways. She is *seduced* by Satan in his guise as a serpent and goes on to *seduce* her husband into eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Brown 1988, 153). If Eve is "seducer," there are implications for the more general area of sexuality. Because of the female role in reproduction and the marked changes in the female body as a result, it is not surprising that sexuality should have been associated with femaleness. The male role in this process is hidden by comparison, and this has contributed to a view of sexuality as somehow distanced from the male. Sexuality has been connected with women, not men. Given the kind of pessimism that connects physicality with decay and death, it is not surprising that figures in the history of philosophy and theology should have viewed female sexuality with suspicion. Woman as creator of life also opens up the inevitability of death. Given that this is her "nature," it seems reasonable to doubt her ability to be "good," particularly when that which is good is defined in juxtaposition to the physical world.

Associating the female with that which is evil is not without consequences for real women. The most notorious example of this, according to the feminist philosopher and post-Christian theologian Mary Daly, is the witch craze of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. For Daly, these events can only be understood if one identifies the deep-rooted misogyny which lends itself to "gynocide" (her term for the systematic murder of women) (Daly 1991, 306).

In making this claim, Daly draws attention to the rhetoric of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1484), the Vatican-endorsed tome which acted as the handbook for the fifteenth-century witch-finders. Its writers describe the weaknesses of women, which they suggest make them more prone to become the devil's familiars than men. Somewhat contradictorily, they argue both that women are the weaker sex *and* that they are powerful enough to enact extreme evil. Importantly, if the evil embodied by the devil is to be identified and defeated, every tool available must be used, and that includes torture. A sickening dynamic is thereby justified: in order to defeat evil, the witch as the conduit of the devil can be treated as less than human, and acts of unbelievable cruelty can legitimately be inflicted upon her (Summers 1971, 223).

More recently, Margaret Denike (2003) has developed Daly's argument, drawing attention to the way in which the definition of witch as evil incarnate leads the Church to sanction a system that persecuted scapegoats. But this is not all. Denike argues that the witch craze reveals the mechanisms behind patriarchal attempts to control women. How better to keep women submissive than by designating some of them as witches who are then subject to torture and horrific forms of execution? What an abject lesson for the rest!

Engaging in the history of ideas is not without an affect on how the standard discussion of evil in the philosophy of religion might be approached. In the witch trials, philosophical

and theological arguments are shown to have shaped political and social action – in this case, supporting acts of great cruelty. Ideas are never innocent; they cannot be detached from the nexus of social relationships that shape our day to day lives. When constructing ideas about evil, we need always to have an eye on the implications of our conclusions for those with whom we share the social space. Philosophy understood in this way is a practical discipline that cannot avoid engagement with the social sphere. As Michele Le Doeuff notes, “knowledge either breeds hope or crushes it” (Le Doeuff 2003, 83), and it is a socially engaged model of philosophy that emerges from acknowledging the gendering of evil in the western tradition.

This is not to say that the readings put forward by Daly and Denike have gone unchallenged. Most obviously, it is difficult to maintain the idea that women were the sole victims of the witch hunts when men were also identified as witches and treated accordingly (though admittedly not in the same numbers). Moreover, it is far from the case that women were condemned only on the word of men. Women often accused other women, as in the infamous cases of the Pendle Witches and the Salem Witch trials. Daly and Denike’s gendering of historical events runs the risk of framing women as innocent victims, incapable of acting wickedly because of their oppression at the hands of men (see West 1995). Such views ignore the existence of women who perpetrate evil (we might think of Myra Hindley or Rose West), while also failing to engage with the complexity of female collusion in acts of violence and abuse committed by men (Motz 2008).

Accepting such criticisms need not mean that we ignore the importance of considering how definitions of evil are constructed. As Denike says, by tracing the history of evil as an idea feminists have exposed the means by which good is defined in contradistinction to an “other” which acts as the image for evil. So in the witch craze, the witch is a cipher for that which is *not-good*, playing a necessary role in how that which constitutes “the good” is envisaged. Once the gender of the witch is acknowledged, we become aware of the use of a specific model of the two sexes to create visions of what is good and what is evil. Male virtues are being opposed to female sins, which affect the way in which society is subsequently structured. We are back to the Pythagorean chart of opposing male and female values.

Tracing the historical identification of women with evil provides, then, the backdrop to the critique of the problem of evil that feminists launch. If feminists are far from content with elements of the problem’s habitual construction, how do they define it? There are a number of different approaches.

## Gendering the Subject

By exposing the role that gender plays in the construction of evil, feminists reveal the habitual identification of femaleness with evil. That women and evil have been connected in this way might come as a surprise, given the continuing influence of the Victorian model of woman as “the angel in the house,” placid, wholesome, good, and kind, occupying the private rather than the public space. While these visions of woman occupy opposite extremes of a spectrum, they allow for the same result: women are removed from the social and political places of influence and power. Not surprisingly, feminists have been concerned to expand the sphere of female influence as well as challenge the distorted images of women that emerge from exclusion. In an attempt to expand the parameters of the

debates surrounding evil, feminists start their exploration with the experience of women. The discussion of moral evil provides an apt illustration of how this method works and how it challenges standard approaches to the subject.

Early feminist reflections on evil focused on exposing the gender assumptions that underpin the Christian notion of sin used to explain the source of the moral failings that lead to wicked acts. Valerie Saiving's groundbreaking work identified the dominant Christian formulation of sin as pride (Saiving 1960). For Saiving, defining sin in this way showed the limitations of a theology that proceeded from male experience of the world. Defining sin as pride is not necessarily appropriate for all; rather it reflects male preoccupations in a society that overwhelmingly revolves around their concerns and assumptions. If Western society assumes that "the male is God" (to appropriate Mary Daly's (1975, 227) famous phrase), it is not surprising that sin should be equated with pride and self-centeredness. To correct *selfishness*, *selflessness* must be cultivated.

Women face a different set of problems, for they inhabit a society whose political, intellectual, and social life is dominated by men. (And note that Saiving is writing before the achievements of the Women's Movement that began in the 1960s and that led to improvements in the legal and social status of women in the West.) Selfishness and pride are not the problems that dominate the lives of the majority of women. What might be called "female sins" emerge from an overemphasis on self-sacrifice as a virtue that stops women developing their own capabilities, allowing them to succumb to passivity, triviality, and the definitions of others (Saiving 1960, 15).

Here, we get an indication of how contemporary feminisms of sexual difference approach evil. Saiving's analysis is shaped by her contention that male experience of the world is different from female experience. Given that is the case, male temptations are different from female temptations. Saiving's analysis depends upon addressing the impact the structures of a male-dominated society has upon men and women. These affects are to be understood differently, bearing in mind one's sex.

More recently, Serene Jones has developed a similar approach through the lens of the French feminist and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray's feminism of sexual difference (Jones 1995; Irigaray 2005). For Irigaray, religious images play a key role in developing one's sense of self as a subject. Irigaray's analysis draws implicitly on Feuerbach's claim that the concept of God is created by humans and reflects human concerns and ideals. More than that, the divine provides a model for the values, ideals, and virtues to be aspired to by the individual. God becomes a template for human subjectivity.

In adopting Feuerbach's framework, Irigaray considers the implications of taking seriously sexual difference for such a model. The process of establishing male subjectivity is well served by a divine who reflects male experience. We might think of the masculine language and images used to establish the concept of God. God is described as "Father," "Lord," "King." In the Christian tradition, he sends his Son who appoints 12 male disciples. It is relatively easy for men to use such images and ideals to develop their sense of who they are and who they want to be.

For women, the situation is far from straightforward. There is no female ideal form espousing a genuine alterity to which women might aspire. We might think, for example, of the way in which ideals of feminine beauty – reflected in the fashion industry – force the female body to be shaped according to ideals of the male rather than the female body: how else to explain the obsession with thinness and angularity? Irigaray's analysis extends this idea to all areas of experience, concluding that women need a "Female Divine" to act



as a divine horizon for shaping their subjectivity (Irigaray 1996). Jones develops the implications of this assessment, arguing that the lack of an appropriate female divine means women are more likely to succumb to the sin of fragmentation. They fail to strive for integration, and thereby fail to develop their own subjectivity (Jones 1995, 61).

In similar vein, Irigaray identifies sin with the failure to recognize sexual difference. Forcing all human experience into one model that reflects male experience means the distinctive experience of women is ignored (Jaarsma 2003). Striving for equality becomes problematic as it can become a mere cipher for forcing women to conform to a set of alien (male) ideals in order to access the political world. Accepting sexual difference challenges this hegemony. But it also challenges the concept of God that underpins theodical discourse. The God of theism – conceived through a set of apparently abstract values – mirrors the masculine history that has nurtured its development. Power, knowledge, immutability, and impassibility (attributes at the heart of this conception) shape and are shaped by ideals of the male. And, of course, it is precisely these attributes that run into difficulty when confronted with issues of evil and suffering. If Irigaray's critique is taken on board, the concept of what is divine might look very different, and in consequence the framing of the problem of evil might, in turn, be presented differently (an idea that we will return to later in this discussion).

## Structural Nature of Evil

Not all feminists accept Irigaray's analysis. The French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff sees Irigaray's solution as deeply problematic; not least because it reflects historical stereotypes of femaleness that place it in opposition to the male. Le Doeuff points out that Irigaray's emphasis on sexual difference is too easily appropriated by conservatives claiming the womanly virtues to lie in the three "c's" ("Ks") of children ("Kinder"), cooking ("Küche"), and church ("Kirche") (Le Doeuff 2003, 65). Le Doeuff's solution is more obviously political, employing the language of equality to challenge discrimination, thus resisting the social injustice women experience as the result of living in unequal societies.

In offering a political solution to evil that focuses attention on combating injustice, Le Doeuff echoes Sharon Welch's expansion of the problem of evil into an analysis of the political and social realm. Welch identifies structural evils – sexism, racism, and classism – enshrined in the political systems and institutions of the West. It is these structures that lead to the kind of experiences that blight women's lives and that a feminist approach to evil – grounded in social action – must challenge (Welch 1990).

Welch's shift in emphasis affects the examples used to illuminate the problem. Rather than employ dramatic illustrations of human brutality, she exposes the less obviously dramatic but much more prevalent effect of unjust structures. In this way, her analysis reflects the influence the writer and cultural critic Hannah Arendt has on feminist thinking about evil (Jantzen 1998; Birmingham 2003; Geddes 2003; Joy 2010).

Arendt's contribution emerges from her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the man responsible for the trains that took the Nazi's victims to the death camps (Arendt 1963). Arendt was struck by how little Eichmann looked the part of a villain. He was inconsequential, bland, boring. He was the classic faceless bureaucrat. He had none of the Promethean glamour associated with evil found in literary figures like Milton's Satan or Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. Instead, his chief worry as he faced judgment was that he had not

advanced quickly enough on his chosen career path. It was this – not his role in making possible the Holocaust – that led him to see himself as something of a failure.

Shocked by this lack of moral awareness and empathy, Arendt coined the term “the banality of evil” (Arendt 1963, 287) to denote the evil that arises from bureaucratic systems where moral judgment is detached from one’s actions. In such structures, all that matters is to do one’s job correctly. Under Arendt’s analysis, evil ceases to be something strange, becoming instead something grounded in the day-to-day processes of a system that cares nothing for the lives of its citizens. This kind of structural evil is extremely difficult to identify and, as a result, can also be incredibly difficult to challenge.

Arendt’s analysis shifts the problem away from the metaphysics of evil toward ethics and the question of how to identify and resist human wickedness. Taking on board Arendt’s ideas, Mary Midgley is hesitant about understanding evil primarily through discussion of the relationship between it and God. Her concern is more immediate: how to identify and deal with wickedness, and she cites with approval Erich Fromm’s maxim: “as long as one believes that the evil man wears horns, one will not discover an evil man” (in Midgley 1984, 5). Evil is less obvious, less dramatic than we might like to think. Expect the wicked to be monstrous and you are unlikely to recognize wickedness when it is being enacted. Like Arendt, Midgley fears that the language of evil too easily aggrandizes it, divorcing it from petty actions and failures that allow wickedness to flourish. Midgley’s analysis offers a rather mundane view of wickedness as based in thoughtlessness. Through the inability to *think* about the consequences of one’s actions, to empathize with the other, awful things can come about.

Neither Midgley nor Arendt offer explicitly feminist analyses, but their approaches suggest something of the way in which the feminist might proceed. Both make a shift away from metaphysical debates toward a focus on the lived experience of wickedness and – most importantly – how to address it and the suffering that results from it.

Recognizing that which is evil in the mundane affects the examples used by different feminist theorists. Rather than abstract or generalized examples of the effects of moral evil, feminists illustrate their work with examples derived from the ordinary experiences of women. For Morny Joy (2010) and Debra Bergoffen (2003), this means recognizing that some evils can only really be understood if located in an analysis of sex and gender. Both Joy and Bergoffen identify rape as a specific evil directed at the female body. In order to understand this phenomenon, the philosopher of evil must consider the complex roots that lead to such abuses.

A good example of what this approach means in practice is provided by the liberation theologian Dorothee Soelle. Soelle describes an instance of domestic violence as a means of identifying the overlapping structures and experiences that make up the contours of suffering. Describing the experience of a woman suffering domestic abuse, Soelle argues that her suffering is multilayered: it is in the bruises she bears on her body, but it is more than that. Isolated and financially dependent on her abuser, she does not have the means to leave. She feels ashamed that her marriage is a failure, but knows that to leave her husband would bring much criticism in a small community that views divorce with disapproval. Were she to divorce, she would have to move away, thereby losing her roots (Soelle 1975, 10–16). Her suffering is physical, but it is also psychological, as well as something shaped by the values of her community. If we are to truly understand the roots of such suffering, and – most importantly – do something to stop it, we must resist simplistic answers that distort its complex roots.

And Soelle is well aware of how theology can act as a further source for such suffering rather than as a solution to it. Soelle identifies a particular understanding of God and humanity that contributes to this woman's suffering (Soelle 1975, 22–28). This is the God conceived as a sadist who inflicts suffering for our own good or in order to punish us for our faults. If this is the case, then in order to be good, we have no choice but to be passive and accept “his” judgment. Soelle resists this image, and her analysis provides a powerful critique of the way in which theology can contribute to the structures of suffering. Responding to suffering entails challenging not just the experiences of suffering, but the ideas that support and sometimes create them. And as we shall see in a moment, it may lead to new visions of the divine that reflect struggles for meaning and liberation.

Michèle Doeuff's analysis is philosophical rather than theological, but like Soelle, she relies upon an example of domestic violence for its force. Her concern is to show the power of philosophical analysis for political liberation. She describes a woman trapped in a violent marriage, incapable of recognizing as violence the violence her husband inflicts on her. Le Doeuff suggests that philosophy has a practical focus, for it enables the identification of “cognitive blockages” that hold the individual prisoner. Through critical thought, it is possible to see more clearly. This clarity of thought is not simply theoretical; it is also liberating: in this case, recognizing as violence the injuries inflicted by her husband opens up the possibility of challenging her social circumstances (Le Doeuff 2003, xv). And here the philosophical engagement with evil takes on social importance. Thinking clearly about the problem, its structure and sources, enables practical and political solutions to emerge.

## Challenging the “Purpose” of Evil

Feminist analysis of the problem of evil seems, then, to be located in a rather different conceptual place to that inhabited by theodocists. In the standard approach to the subject, the philosopher of religion's concern is to secure – or challenge – the existence of God in the face of what is undoubtedly the greatest threat to “his” acceptance. Central to this task is the attempt to establish whether suffering is meaningless or whether it has a place in a universe created by God. This focus makes possible the sidelining of political and social injustice; as best it is placed on the margins, at worse ignored altogether. Yet feminists highlight another problem with this approach: attempting to establish the meaning or meaninglessness of suffering can avoid a proper engagement with the voice of the victim.

We might start with the examples provided by Richard Swinburne as he seeks to explain the place of evil and suffering in God's universe. Like toothache or the socializing of small children (Swinburne 1977, 81–82; 89), pain plays an important role in the creation. Evil and suffering are also meaningful, he argues, for they provide the necessary counterpoint to goodness and pleasure, enabling the development of moral virtues and help to establish better, deeper ways of living (Swinburne 2000): a rather neat approach to solving the problem.

Jennifer Geddes illustrates something of the feminist dissatisfaction with this kind of approach through considering Charlotte Delbo's reflections on her experiences as a prisoner in Auschwitz. In contrast to Swinburne's rather bland examples, Delbo refuses to lessen the horror of the experience of real suffering: it is brutal, dehumanizing, and lacks any quality that suggests the possibility of future redemption. Delbo describes the extremes to which human brutality can bring a person, resisting the idea that such suffering could

ever have a purpose. To the contrary, such suffering brings with it only “useless knowledge” (Geddes 2003, 106). To illustrate this, she describes the experience of knowing that your mother is dead, yet being completely unable to shed a tear. What *precisely* does knowing that it is possible for a person to respond to their mother’s death in this deadened way add to knowledge of what it is to be human? Delbo’s answer is short and to the point. It adds nothing of real value. It is the kind of knowledge it would be better not to know.

Geddes believes Delbo’s comments raise questions about the academic engagement with evil and suffering. Feminists stress the importance of hearing women into speech. Given the history of evil that we traced earlier, we see what happens when women are denied a space in the intellectual and political sphere: ideas and systems that exclude them become commonplace and enshrined.

Geddes extends this insight to the experience of the sufferer and their place in theodical discourse. The philosopher of evil or the theodist can all-too-easily become an interpreter of the experiences of the one suffering. As Geddes points out, the problem is that we can easily “impose our “vision” of suffering onto their experiences” (Geddes 2003, 106), rather than paying attention to what the sufferer actually says. And this is vitally important for considering how suffering might be understood. Only the sufferer can determine whether their suffering was useful or not. Placing the sufferer centre stage marks the end of discourses of mastery where one speaks of evil with “a knowledge of evil from on high” (Geddes 2003, 114). The implication here is that the language of theodicy is inadequate to the task of really listening to the suffering, and Geddes moves away from theodicy toward a perspective that has much in common with that of liberation theology. When we reflect upon evil and suffering, we should do so in such a way that the victim is able to speak and to be heard rather than forcing our own words and concerns into their mouths.

## Evil in Relationships

Geddes exemplifies the feminist concern to place the discussion of evil and suffering squarely in the context of concrete situations. Attention shifts away from discourse of God toward an analysis of human relationships. Evil is understood as something relational, for, as Geddes notes, “evil occurs between people” (Geddes 2003, 105).

Taking this approach generates a variety of perspectives. So Claudia Card draws attention to sources that support acts of genocide. Her analysis focuses specifically on the kind of social relationships that lend themselves to the rejection of particular groups (Card 2003). For others, such as Drusilla Cornell (2003), Alison Jaggar (2003), and Sara Ruddick (2003), it necessitates addressing the events of 9/11 and the relationship between religion, the state, and systems of terror. This does not mean that there is agreement on the kind of approach to this epoch-making event on the part of feminists. Ruddick focuses on “the moral horror” of this event, while Cornell recognizes the dangers of allowing one violent act to spawn more violence.

There may be differences, but what is being offered here are forms of contextual philosophy. That popular slogan of Second Wave feminism – “the personal is political” – also informs the discussion of evil. Evil and suffering are rooted in human relationships rather than (primarily) in some cosmic narrative about the nature of the universe. Making this shift means identifying, as Grace Jantzen notes, the central task as “putting an end to

suffering" (Jantzen 1998, 111). Understanding the roots of evil actions is important, but only if it acts to inform a deeper activism that seeks change.

It is worth paying attention to this claim, for it suggests that feminist philosophy is never a purely intellectual matter. It is practical, connected to the task of how to live. For that reason, a book like Blake Morrison's (1997) *As If* provides a suitable model for the kind of engagement with evil a feminist might make. Morrison recounts the trial of the ten year old boys who killed the toddler James Bulger; but the book does far more than that. Morrison seeks to understand the complex roots of this appalling act, but uses it to consider what it means to be a child. It is an approach that leads him to challenge the propriety of a legal system that tries children in adult court. Approaching evil in this way lends itself to the critique of the political and legal status quo.

## Evil and the Concept of God

Emphasizing practical engagement with evil and suffering does not mean that no feminist accounts consider the effect on the divine. There are, however, significant differences between such accounts and those offered by theodacists.

A good example is provided by Melissa Raphael in her Jewish feminist theology of the Holocaust. Raphael resists the attempts of Jewish (male) theologians to find reasons for justifying God's failure to act in the face of such suffering. She highlights the use made of the free will defense to achieve this end, particularly in the theology of Eliezer Berkowitz. Raphael identifies a key assumption: Berkowitz and others who employ a similar method see freedom and autonomy as the defining characteristics of humanity. This leads them to conclude that the best approach to the suffering in the camps is to show how individuals were able to maintain a sense of their own autonomy, thereby overcoming the evil that had engulfed them.

Raphael's approach is different. She focuses on the experience of women in the camps and suggests a different model of what it is to be human. Rather than stress the shoring up of individual autonomy, she focuses on the relationships of the "sisterhoods" that sprang up in some of the camps. Identifying this collective network of support leads her to develop a radically different view of God from that which defines other theistic accounts. Rather than seeing God as the ultimate example of a free individual (the image that she believes lies behind the free will defense), she offers an image of God "immanent as Shekinah" (Raphael 2004, 146–147). This immanent, suffering God is not separate from the experience of the camps, but is found in the faces of those in the camps and (importantly) in their relationships.

Raphael thus develops a rather different view of the divine from that which constructs familiar narratives concerning evil. In similar vein, Grace Jantzen develops a form of pantheism where the divine is not seen as apart from the world, but immanent within it. The world is God's body, as she frames it in her early theology (Jantzen 1984). Later, drawing upon Irigaray, she sees the divine as a horizon toward which we are moving; an ideal that is reflected in the world around us. Shifting attention away from a God who exists separately from the world allows for a different focus to develop in relation to evil and suffering. And in this Jantzen reflects that broader principle of the feminist engagement with evil. What matters is not justifying the ways of God to "men," but taking seriously the world

and the people that inhabit it in order to find ways of challenging injustice and bringing about better ways of living for all.

## Conclusion

Feminist responses to evil and suffering are rich and varied. While there is not one feminist way of engaging with such realities, there is a common concern to relate the problem less to a hypothetical divine, and more to the kind of systems, actions, and ways of living that might bring about a better kind of world.

Considering evil can be dispiriting. It can lead us to wonder if things could ever be different. But by grounding the discussion in the reality of human relationships, feminists suggest what Morny Joy has called a “muted optimism” (Joy 2010, 23) about the future. Joy’s claim comes as she considers Jantzen’s advocacy of natality as a way of understanding what it is to be human. Jantzen argues that we are all natals; we have all been born. She claims this offers the possibility of a more positive engagement with each other than the traditional focus on mortality where we are defined by the fact that we will die. Affirming natality suggests the possibility of taking seriously our relationships with each other, for in birth, we are all born into community, however weak or limited it might be. We are all dependent upon each other. A philosophy that starts from this principle will – as a matter of urgency – have to consider the things that promote better forms of community and relationship.

This practical focus forms the basis for the kind of engagement with evil and suffering that feminists offer. Resisting the temptation to practice philosophy as a form of detached, intellectual game leads feminists to an approach to evil and suffering that always necessitates engagement with the effect structures and practices have on human beings. It is this practical focus that offers the possibility not just for creative engagements with suffering, but for the kind of philosophical practice that is of relevance not just to the academy but to the wider world itself.

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# Process Theism and Theodicies for Problems of Evil

JAMES A. KELLER

I shall define traditional theism as the belief that there is an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God. I consider that a feature of our world generates a problem of evil if its existence seems *prima facie* other than what we would expect if traditional theism is true and this God created and providentially superintends the world. Certainly one such feature is the vast amount of pain and suffering endured by humans and other animals, as well as the vast amount of human wickedness that causes some of this pain and suffering. This is typically termed *the problem of evil* (see Chapter 4). But because I believe that there are other important problems of evil, I prefer to term it the traditional problem of evil. A second problem of evil – at least for those, like Christians, who claim that God wants humans to live in a relationship of love with God and with each other – is the problem of divine hiddenness: it is not clear to everyone that God exists, something of what God is like, and how God wants people to live. Sometimes, attempts are made to claim that these unclaritys are eliminated – or at least sufficiently reduced – by divine revelation, which Christians claim was given in or through the Bible. But rather than solving the second problem, this claim raises a third problem: the lack of strong reasons to believe that any book, including the Bible, is or contains divine revelation and the lack of clarity in what is allegedly revealed there. In response, many Christians have claimed that the Bible's status as divine revelation is certified by supernatural miracles related there. But if God performed miracles for certain people in biblical times that gave them good reasons to believe that some person or some message had divine certification, then God's not doing this for all other people who need good reasons for this belief is still another problem of evil: it seems inconsistent with perfect goodness for God to favor some people who needed divine certification and not give it to others who also need it. And if it is claimed that the accounts of miracles in the Bible provide the needed certification, I would reply that the documentation for these events is far short of what is needed.

These are admittedly only *prima facie* problems, and many traditional theists have argued in various ways that they are not good reasons to doubt that traditional theism is true. In this chapter, I will consider some of the things Christian traditional theists, usually relying on other ideas held by some Christians, have said to defend traditional theism. Even confining myself to major Christian suggestions, I can do no more than briefly indicate why I think that such responses do not succeed and then outline what I believe to be a far more adequate response, that of process theism. (Some of my comments may have relevance for traditional theists in other religions, but I make no claims about that here.)

## Traditional Theodicy

I believe that traditional theism – whether Christian or not – implies that God’s intended state for humans is one of unalloyed joy, as is found in ideas of heaven. Why would an all-good, omnipotent creator intend less? But we clearly do not live in such a state. That is why the traditional problem of evil arises. Because much suffering results from the actions of humans, many Christian traditional theists have suggested that suffering occurs because of the misuse of free will, sometimes also saying that natural processes cause suffering because of human sinfulness in the past. More common today is the suggestion that this world is a place of moral and spiritual development (in John Hick’s terminology, soul-making) to prepare us for our final state (see Chapter 14). But why accept either of these suggested explanations of why God permits this suffering? The only possible reasons are alleged revelation or the claim that one of these suggestions is a good way to explain the occurrence of suffering if there is an omnipotent, all-good creator of this world. In the course of this chapter, I will give reasons to doubt both that we have any suitable revelation and that God is omnipotent. Moreover, I will argue that proponents of the soul-making response are wrong in their claim that it requires divine hiddenness; quite the contrary is more likely true.

It does seem indisputable that the pains and suffering in this world occur as the result of natural processes and the behavior of humans and other living things. Because God does not prevent harm to the innocent (as God certainly could and as humans of even moderate goodness would if they could), it seems that only a settled policy of not intervening could explain God’s not preventing the harm. Many Christian traditional theists explain this policy by saying that it is a consequence of God’s respect for human free will and the value God places on humans’ freely deciding to do what is right and to help those in need. However, even some Christian traditional theists doubt that these are important enough goods to outweigh the evils that God does not prevent (e.g., Swinburne 1998, 241) (see Chapter 14).

Many Christian traditional theists also claim that God occasionally suspends this policy and intervenes in what are termed miracles. But I would argue that there are no well-documented instances when it seems as though God has done so, even in relation to what seem to us the greatest evils: meaning-destroying events (such as the Holocaust) and natural disasters of immense proportions. And if God does occasionally intervene in ways we cannot detect (or in ways we could detect, for that matter), then God seems to be unfair because God spares from harm some people but not others who seem equally needy and no less worthy. Thus, it seems that Christian traditional theists should give up the claim

that God ever intervenes in worldly processes to prevent or alleviate harm to humans and presumably animals as well.<sup>1</sup>

The second problem of evil I identified is divine hiddenness: its not being clear to (virtually) every adult that God exists, something of what God is like, and what God's will is for human beings. One proposed response is that human sinfulness keeps people from seeing God. But surely an omnipotent God would be able to overcome the alleged effects of this sinfulness. Another response is that most humans are too proud and that God reveals Godself only to people who humble themselves. But this seems to have it backwards: if it were clear that an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God exists and graciously invites all humans to fellowship with God and each other, it seems that this would itself be humbling. Moreover, it is hardly a fair test of one's humility in seeking God when it is not clear whether there is a God and, if there is, how to seek God. One's devotion should not be measured by one's searching without knowing how for something that may not even exist; rather, it should be measured by one's willingness to do even difficult things for God when it is clear that there is a loving God who wants these things done. Indeed, it seems unreasonable to expect humans to live as God allegedly wants when it is not clear that there is a God or what God wants.

But the mention of willingness to do even difficult things that God clearly wants done suggests another, more common explanation of divine hiddenness: if the things I mentioned were clear, then humans would turn to God out of narrow self-interest rather than because they genuinely love God. It is worth noting that not all biblical writers shared this concern. For example, I Kings 18 contains the narrative of a dramatic, obvious miracle demonstrating the true God to a large crowd, and John 20 contains the narrative of a demonstration of the bodily resurrection of Jesus to a doubting disciple. However, I agree that if God were not hidden, some people would turn to God out of narrow self-interest, but I doubt that this would be a conclusive reason why God should be hidden. For it may well happen that people who initially turn to God out of narrow self-interest eventually come to genuinely love God. By analogy, many parents teach their children morality by appealing to self-interest (rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior), yet often these children become adults who do morally right things because they are morally right and not out of self-interest. Of course, if God were not hidden, there is no guarantee that everyone would eventually be devoted to God for only appropriate reasons, but divine hiddenness certainly does not result in everyone's being devoted to God, to say nothing of being devoted to God for only right reasons. Thus, I conclude that God's not being hidden would probably be a more successful policy for achieving what Christians typically claim are God's wishes for humans.

Sometimes, it is claimed that the important things about God that people need to know have been revealed. Many Christians claim that the Bible is or contains this revelation. But I believe that on the contrary, this claim generates a third problem of evil: it is not clear that the Bible is a divinely certified book, and it is not clear what God is communicating in it. I do not deny that the Bible contains some sublime passages and enlightening mate-

1 This is not to deny the possibility that God might try to influence humans to do what is right not by a clearly miraculous intervention but by some sort of persuasive influence, such as what is sometimes referred to as the voice of conscience or the calling of the Holy Spirit. However, the supernaturalism of traditional theism entails that even these subtle influences would be miracles (divine interference with creaturely processes).

rial. But what I do deny is that there is any good reason to think that it is inspired by God in a way that is qualitatively unlike the inspiration of all other writings. Its differences from other writings are matters of degree, not of kind, and some other writings may well convey better insights about God than do parts of the Bible. Throughout Christian history, the alleged qualitative uniqueness of the Bible was often defended by claiming that its status was divinely certified by miracles recorded in it. But these alleged miracles are poorly documented. Moreover, even if some were done, they would not certify the entire Bible. They would not necessarily certify even the entire book in which they are recorded, but perhaps only the passage in which they are recorded. Moreover, many books do not record any miracles. And we have no good reason to think there is divine certification of the canon of the Bible. Perhaps some books were included that should not have been or some were omitted that should have been included. No one has ever claimed that some miracle indicates divine certification of the church's judgment about the canon.

In addition to the problem of the lack of divine certification of the Bible, there is also the problem that the Bible is just not clear on many points, even those that are important to mainstream Christians. Many mainstream Christians themselves admit this (e.g., Swinburne 1992, 177; Plantinga 2000, 381–382). No biblical passage sets forth the Trinity or the dual natures of Christ with the clarity of later creeds. It is not clear whether infants as well as adults should be baptized, whether there should be only one human head of the worldwide Christian community, and whether remarriage after divorce is permissible. Christians struggle over whether various passages are to be taken literally or not; I have in mind not just arguments about the accounts of creation in Genesis, but also whether the elements in the mass (or Lord's Supper, or communion) literally become the actual body and blood of Christ. So much in the Bible is unclear that it seems unreasonable to call it a revelation of anything, except perhaps the beliefs and activities of some individuals and groups – and even these are often not clear. Surely an all-powerful and all-knowing God could reveal clearly whatever God intended to reveal! The absence of clarity in the Bible seems an excellent reason to doubt that it is or contains revelation by an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God. Of course, it may contain truths about God, but so may other books.

Finally, there is the problem raised by alleged miracles. If miracles occurred, they could reduce suffering, reduce divine hiddenness, and help to certify divine revelation. But to do the last two, they would have to be clear miracles, not just events that might be seen as miracles, such as unusual recoveries from illnesses. Most people today have not experienced events that are clear miracles, nor do we today have good documentary evidence for the occurrence of miracles that we have not directly experienced. But if there are clear miracles experienced by only a few people and not well documented, then God seems to have unfairly not given to others what God has given to these favored few. This charge of unfairness could also be leveled, rightly in my opinion, against God if God acts miraculously (whether obviously or not) to prevent or alleviate the suffering of a few and not others who are at least equally needy and no less worthy. And if God is unfair, then God is not all good.

What is my conclusion from these considerations? Let us remember that all Christians say that God loves humans and wants humans to live in love and devotion to God and in fellowship with God and each other. I believe that this leads us legitimately and rightly to expect that an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God would alleviate at least massive human suffering and make God's existence, character, and will for humans clearly known. But God has not done these things. Nor would such a God miraculously help, or reveal

Godself to, some people and not others who are equally needy and no less worthy. Because most people are not recipients of God's revelation or miraculous help, it is likely that God does not act miraculously in the world.

Thus, I claim that traditional theism has no good explanation why the world exhibits the features that generate the first three problems of evil and that we have no good reason to believe that God intervenes miraculously in the world. If I am right in my claim, I believe that this constitutes a serious challenge to traditional theism. But some Christian traditional theists, especially during the last 30 years have given a different sort of response to the traditional problem of evil. Their response, often called skeptical theism, claims that God might have morally sufficient reasons to permit suffering we cannot grasp and/or that we should not expect to be able to judge the adequacy of God's reasons (see Chapter 29). Of course, if they are right, then we also cannot judge that God does have adequate reasons unless we deduce this from traditional theism (and perhaps other, distinctively Christian beliefs) – and this would beg the question about the truth of traditional theism. Similar comments apply if skeptical theism is used as a response to divine hiddenness. Moreover, skeptical theists cannot claim that God has revealed (clearly, or why reveal it?) anything and also that God is hidden. Clear revelation eliminates divine hiddenness with respect to whatever is revealed. If God is hidden (as seems undeniable), then there is no clear revelation; therefore, allegedly revealed truths cannot be used to justify traditional theism or other claims about God.

## Process Theodicy

Because I believe that none of the responses by Christian traditional theists that I discussed are adequate, I propose process theism as a better way to respond to the problems of evil. Given my earlier arguments against revelation, arguments for any ideas about God will have to be based on more general considerations, certainly metaphysics and probably also the concept of a perfect being. Unfortunately, the conclusions drawn from these sorts of considerations are almost always highly controversial. For example, many Christian thinkers held that a perfect being must be impassible, but other Christian thinkers denied this. Whether God is timeless or everlasting in time is controversial. So is whether the future already exists and whether God sees future events as timelessly present. Because assertions about metaphysics and about a perfect being are so controversial, I cannot in this chapter present metaphysical arguments for the claims I will make;<sup>2</sup> I will simply state the relevant ideas from process philosophy and show how they enable process theists to respond to the features of the world that generate the problems of evil I discussed. What I believe to be the superiority of this response is one important support for process theism. I will also suggest other features of our world that process theism enables us to understand better than traditional theism does.

One very important way in which process theism differs from traditional theism is that it is naturalistic rather than supernaturalistic. Traditional theists typically claim that God created the universe out of nothing; therefore, all its basic features are the result of divine fiat, and any can be changed by God at any time. Process theists claim that God and some

2 One defense is Hartshorne in *Further Reading*; chapter 9 is particularly relevant.

universe (i.e., some nondivine actualities, not necessarily the ones in our universe) form an interrelated system whose most basic features are everlasting characteristics of the system; none is chosen by God or modifiable by divine fiat. In this system, God and other actualities have certain roles. To explain these roles I must say some other things about process metaphysics.

Process metaphysics claims that the fundamental sort of creatures are momentary events, each generally thought to occupy less than a fraction of a second (perhaps a very small fraction of a second) and a very small volume of space. Such events are called (in Whitehead's terminology) *actual occasions of experience*. They are the ultimate individuals that make up the world. Ordinary macroscopic objects, such as humans, trees, and rocks, are spatially and temporally extended collections of related actual occasions called societies. Each actual occasion begins with data from occasions in its past and from God, but past occasions and God make different sorts of contributions to the new occasion. Past occasions contribute data that limit what the new occasion can become and create some pressure for the new occasion to include certain features found in the past occasions. Within those limits, God provides a graded range of possibilities for what the new occasion can become. The new occasion then develops into a fully concrete thing (in a process termed *concrescence*) by "deciding" what it will become from among its range of possibilities. I put *deciding* in scare quotes because there is no implication of consciousness in the "decision." Whitehead chose the term to indicate that the occasion becomes one definite thing, thus cutting off all other possibilities for what it can become (Whitehead 1978, 43) and setting limits for what occasions in its future can become. Its becoming that thing, within the range of possibilities allowed by its past, is entirely up to it; nothing else determines which of the possibilities it becomes. That each occasion is in this sense partly self-determining is metaphysically necessary.

According to process thought, God's experience, unlike that of nondivine occasions, includes all the details of every previous occasion. Therefore, God's decisions, unlike those of nondivine occasions, do not impose any additional limits on new occasions; nor do they alter the pressures created by the inclusion of certain characteristics in the occasions in the past. Instead, God's decisions are *evaluations* of what past entities have become and of what new entities can become. These influence new occasions by offering possibilities for the occasion and God's evaluation of those possibilities. In this way, God's contribution creates a resistible inclination (in Whitehead's term, a lure) for the occasion to develop itself in a particular way (the way most favored by God), as well as offering and evaluating other possibilities. In short, God evaluates and offers to the occasions possibilities within the range established by the past, but God does not further limit that range or exclude any possibilities from it.<sup>3</sup>

Process theists believe that the metaphysical features discussed in the foregoing two paragraphs are metaphysically necessary, neither created nor modifiable by divine fiat. They explain why God cannot unilaterally bring about any particular state of affairs in the universe. The past limits what can occur at a particular time and place, and each new occasion makes the final determination of what it will be within those limits. God cannot negate the effects of the past nor overpower the partial self-determination exercised by the occasion. The divine lure is an attraction toward a certain way in which the new occasion may

3 Some material in the two foregoing paragraphs is excerpted from Keller (2007, 136–138).

constitute itself. It is always initially felt subconsciously. If the final state of an occasion includes some conscious elements, the divine lure may be among the attractions felt consciously, but there is no way to isolate with any reliability which of the attractions felt in that final state are from God and which from other sources. Therefore, we cannot identify the divine origin of certain feelings and ideas by the qualities of our experience of them; rather, because of what we believe God to be like on the basis of general considerations, we may judge that particular feelings and ideas are the sorts of things that might have a divine origin. Because humans often have a wide range of possibilities open to them, the extent to which they follow the divine lure is an important factor in human life and in the impact humans have on the rest of the world. If (the occasions that constitute the minds of) a large enough number of people accept a similar divine lure, there may result a historical movement that improves the lives of many humans and/or other animals. Thus, though God cannot unilaterally bring about any particular state of affairs in the universe, God's lure can be an important factor in what happens. Moreover, if process metaphysics is correct, God has the maximum power of any actual being. Only God can directly influence every other actuality and only God has the power to perfectly feel all that other actualities experience. God's active and passive powers are the maximum possible for any actuality, and therefore the greatest conceivable and appropriate for a perfect being.

The foregoing points from process metaphysics enable us to see why the world has the features that generate the problems of evil for traditional theism. God does not perform miracles because God cannot negate the efficient causation of past occasions on the new occasion, which a miracle would require. This is also why God cannot prevent natural disasters nor directly prevent evildoers from harming others. God can and does lure people not to do evil and to try to prevent and/or ameliorate the suffering caused by human wrongdoers and natural disasters. God cannot perform dramatic miracles that would be strong evidence of God's existence and ability to unilaterally bring about creaturely states of affairs. God cannot unilaterally manipulate worldly processes so as to cause people to hear messages or see things. God can lure people to think or feel certain things, but God cannot guarantee that they will think or feel these things, and people cannot justifiably claim to identify on the basis of some quality of the experience which of their thoughts or feelings have a divine source. This, along with God's not being able to intervene miraculously in worldly processes, is why there can be no divinely certified clear communication that is a divine revelation. Of course, God's lure may inspire humans to think or feel some things, but the thoughts and feelings of any human have so many sources in addition to the divine lure that all human speech and actions must be evaluated for their conformity with what we believe God to be like rather than followed simply because someone or some group claims that they have a divine source. Therefore, no written or spoken word carries divine authority; even allegedly divinely revealed books must, like all other writings, be evaluated in light of all known relevant considerations. These results conform to the conclusions about the world that we arrived at earlier in this essay.

God, as understood in process theism, is unequivocally good, always luring every occasion toward what is best (maximum harmony and intensity in the experiences that constitute it and relevant future occasions), but God is unable to guarantee that the lure will be followed. Moreover, God can lure a new occasion only to the best that occasions in its past allow; God cannot undo or overrule the efficient causation of past occasions. But though God cannot guarantee that any particular worldly state of affairs will obtain, God is always and everywhere involved in the world, luring it to be the best it can be. And the places in



the world that offer the greatest scope for divine influence to make significant differences are occasions that constitute the minds of beings with the greatest amount of freedom: humans.

I submit that the implications of process theism for how God can affect the world conform to the world and our own lives as we experience them. By contrast, Christian traditional theists believe that these features of the world and our lives are only temporary and that some day in some realm (on earth or in heaven) the world and our experience will be like that which mainstream Christian beliefs about God's intentions for humans would lead us to expect: there will no pain or suffering; God's existence, character, and will will be plain to everyone; and all humans there will experience intimately a close fellowship with God and each other. However, there is no good reason to expect this future. The only good reason would be clear divine revelation, and we have no good reason to believe that any has occurred and good reasons to doubt it.

Process theism enables us to understand why some persons have better lives than others even though God loves each equally and experiences fully all the joys and sorrows that each person feels. God wants the best for each person at every moment in that person's life. But the best that is possible for a person at any moment depends on the details of the situation at that moment, matters God cannot control.

Process theism enables us to understand why even very devout people who earnestly seek to know God and obey God's will often continue to disagree about what God is like and what God's will is. Moreover, process theism (unlike traditional theism) enables us to understand why God did not reveal Godself clearly to people in other cultures, such as that of India, China, and those of the Western hemisphere prior to the coming of Europeans. God could not reveal Godself more clearly to people in these other cultures and bring them to knowledge of the "truth" as believers claim it to be. In all these cultures, God is luring people to a more adequate understanding of religiously important matters, but God always (including in Christian cultures) must operate within the limits imposed by the past of these cultures.

Process theism also enables us to understand why God took billions of years to lure into existence rational beings who could be religious rather than creating them and the rest of living things in a few days, as an omnipotent God could have done and many Christians believed. At any place in space and time, God can only try to lure into existence what is the best possible state of affairs within the limits set by the past of that place. Nondivine actualities "decide" their response to the divine lure. Because God and nondivine actualities cocreate the world, God cannot guarantee any particular rate of progress toward goals.

If process theism is accepted as a framework for solving the problems of evil and more generally for understanding Christianity, some rethinking of what are often taken to be central Christian doctrines will be necessary. A process theist framework will require giving up any claim to have a privileged understanding of God. It will lack an authoritative revelation in Scripture or tradition; rather, they will be seen as ways in which humans responded to what they took to be divine leading and from which we can learn as we can learn from other humans. It will require a rethinking of Christology, probably eschatology, and perhaps of other Christian doctrines as well.

Thus, process theism requires a transformation of mainstream Christianity, but the beliefs that characterize mainstream Christianity are themselves the result of often bitter disputes among people who thought of themselves as Christians, and we have no reason to think that the correct resolution was always reached, even though that resolution became

a part of what we now think of as mainstream Christianity. Moreover, mainstream Christianity has undergone many transformations in its history. The primacy of the pope, the role of the magisterium, the idea of the church as an intermediary between God and humans, baptizing by sprinkling and baptizing infants, denying women clerical ordination – these and many other ideas once held by all Christians came to be rejected by many. Only if God's existence and will were clear to virtually everyone or we had a communication that was clearly divinely certified revelation would we be justified in thinking that all Christians must adhere to certain beliefs. Because neither condition is met, any way of understanding Christianity is just one way of integrating some elements from the tradition with some insights from today. Process theism offers us a way that I believe makes sense of the world as we know it without appealing to dubious alleged revelations and without denying that there is a divine being who is all-good and all-knowing and who is in all things working for good with the maximum power any one actual being could have. For all these reasons, I submit that process theism offers a better framework for responding to the problems of evil than does traditional theism even when the latter is supplemented with ideas whose alleged status as revealed truths cannot be justified.<sup>4</sup>

## Further Reading

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4 A fuller discussion of many of the points in this essay can be found in Keller (2007).

# Theodicy in a Vale of Tears

EVAN FALES

“Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance – and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth.”

“No, I wouldn’t consent,” said Alyosha softly.

“And can you admit the idea that men for whom you are building it would agree to accept their happiness on the foundation of the unexpiated blood of a little victim? And accepting it would remain happy for ever?”

“No, I can’t admit it. Brother,” said Alyosha ~The Brothers Karamazov

For me, Alyosha’s answer is moral bedrock. Any theodicy that answers “yes” to Ivan’s questions is unworthy of serious consideration. This places a serious constraint upon theodicy, one not all theodicies satisfy. Ivan’s question highlights two fundamental ethical principles that a world teleologically ordered by, and toward, the good must satisfy: first, that ends do not in general justify means, and second, that injustice, no matter how necessary for some greater good, must be rectified. But what would have to occur in order for innocent blood to be expiated?

Here intuitions differ in ways critical to assessing the adequacy of a theodicy. On one view, for example, it is OK for the innocent to suffer unwillingly (perhaps to serve some good for others), so long as in the end it is “made up to them”: not only are they happy, but this happiness both outweighs the suffering they endured, and is given to them by those instrumental in their suffering, as restitution and reward. (If their subsequent happiness were merely an accidental by-product of their having suffered, then I think we would agree

that justice had not been served.) Perhaps this kind of theodicy is implied by the ending of the book of Job; let us therefore call it a Jobian theodicy (see Chapter 26).

Maybe something in the neighborhood of the Jobian theodicy has merit; I will return to this presently. Nevertheless, as it stands, the Jobian theodicy cannot be adequate. Before I tackle that, let me stand back and describe more generally my project here.

## Methodological Preliminaries

First, two methodological notes. Among responses to the problem of evil, it is customary to distinguish defenses from theodicies. As I will understand this distinction, it is a kind of burden-of-proof distinction. The atheist infers from the existence of (certain kinds of) evil that theism is false. A defense puts the burden of proof on atheists, and is successful if it can show that the relevant facts about evil are not inconsistent with the existence of God; it is enough if the atheist has failed to close off the possibility that God exists. A theodicy, however, undertakes a theistic explanation of evil, to show how the evils in question are for the best: how they fit into God's plan. That places the burden of proof on the theist.

I think this distinction is, ultimately, unhelpful. If a defense appeals to some possibility that is very improbable, then it is epistemically hobbled;<sup>1</sup> if a theodicy falls short of explaining how evils cited in a target argument from evil fit into God's plan, but offers an account that is promising and plausible, then so much the worse for the argument from evil. I say, dispense with burdens of proof, and let the evidential chips fall where they may. I consider the resulting inquiry to be an inquiry into the effectiveness of various theodicies as replies to one or another aspect of the problem of evil.

My second methodological note concerns the argument from evil itself. It is customary to distinguish a logical from an evidential problem (see Chapter 2). This distinction, too, is artificial by my lights. The clearest way to pose the problem, I think, is as a problem about the inconsistency of the existence of gratuitous evil and the existence of God. Then the argument can focus, as it properly should, on making precise what it is for an evil to be gratuitous, and what the evidence is for the existence of any such evil – that is, on the evidence for the truth of the critical premise of the reformulated logical argument.

## Classifying Theodicies

It is tempting to attempt a survey and critique of the main types of theodicy. But that is a task impossible to undertake here. For one thing, there are different sorts of evils (moral evils, natural evils, physical and psychological suffering, ordinary evils, and horrendous ones), and different theodicies that speak to the distinct problems they raise. For another, there are differences about the sorts of resources that can, and should, be brought to bear on those problems (e.g., different conceptions of the afterlife, divine power and foreknowl-

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1 I have in mind, for example, Plantinga's (1974) neo-Augustinian appeal to the workings of Satan to account for natural evils. Plantinga claims only the logical possibility of devils. One can concede that much, without thinking that the required demonology is remotely plausible.

edge, human nature and freedom, laws of nature, etc.). For yet another, there are different conceptions of what criteria a theodicy must meet.

While I cannot hope to comment on every variety of theodicy generated by these considerations, I do want to make some remarks about the last point raised. The different theodicies in the market betray a range of different moral intuitions and emphases that bear on whether a theodicy is satisfactory or not.

For starters, consider the goodness of God. Suppose God's goodness consists in, at least, His beneficence and justice: it is not clear how He can be both maximally benevolent and maximally just. If maximal benevolence entails maximal mercy, that seems to entail God's skimping on the justice. How this tension is resolved leads to differing conceptions of human fate and of what ultimate state constitutes an overcoming of evil.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, there are divergent views about God's relation to the moral law. Many theists hold that God is not subject to the moral law, and thus has no duties toward created beings – though, as He is necessarily perfectly good, He necessarily always does the best and never acts immorally.<sup>3</sup>

Very roughly, we may order theodicies on a scale from left to right, according to their tough-mindedness: from soft-hearted to hard-nosed. On the far right, views tend to exhibit some of the following characteristics: a severe conception of retributivist justice, a severe conception of human depravity and its inevitable and legitimate consequences, a denial that God is subject to moral obligations toward His creatures, a strong emphasis on divine sovereignty, an inference that God as creator can, for any reason He might have and without injustice, at any time snuff out the life of any human being, and a judgment that the suffering of innocents can be justified by some greater good elsewhere.

On this end of the spectrum lie St. Paul, Augustine, Anselm (according to whom *any* offense against God is infinitely blameworthy), and Calvin. Among contemporaries, we may include Swinburne, van Inwagen, and a large number of evangelical philosophers and theologians.

I do not propose to tangle with these views here (having done so elsewhere). I would just observe that, if you are willing to jettison enough basic moral intuitions, you can get the bar low enough that even a rather un-lovely God can clear it. The soft-hearted theodicies are worth much more serious consideration.

Left-wingers set a tougher standard for successful theodicy. Their central characteristics are a far stronger sense of the badness of significant evils, and much more concern with the implications of the moral worth and considerability of persons. They emphasize God's love. They reject a God whose justice and goodness are radically different from our own conceptions of justice and the good. Most especially, they tend strongly to reject allowing that persons can be used merely as means. Justice demands that innocent suffering in the end redound to the advantage of the sufferer; it must be made up to him or her. Because

2 Most obviously, it leads to different Christian conceptions of hell. Universalists like Hick (*resquiescat in pace*) deny that hell is forever, and tend to see hell as of our own making – a willful continuation of the separation from God that we experience in this life so long as we cling to our sinful ways and refuse God's salvation. The hardliners take a rather more traditional view: the die is cast when the body dies, and hell is a place of eternal, extreme torment.

3 Voluntarist versions of a divine command or will theory of moral obligation virtually eliminate the problem of evil: whatever God commands or wills is *a fortiori* morally acceptable. In my view, this is a *reductio* of those theories.

they require satisfying the demands of justice on behalf of innocents, they offer hope of a response to Ivan's challenge.<sup>4</sup>

I therefore want to examine soft-hearted (or, as I would prefer to say, good-hearted) theodicies; in particular, I want to consider some aspects of Eleonore Stump's recent, magisterial *Wandering in Darkness*, which, to my mind, has set the gold standard for theodicies. I cannot, of course, hope to do justice to Stump's work – that would require an extended meditation in its own right – but I want to ask whether, in particular, her conception of how innocent suffering can be set aright for the sufferer (and for the world) can meet Ivan's challenge.<sup>5</sup>

## Stump's Theodicy

Stump mounts a defense rather than a theodicy, and only a limited defense, at that (see Chapters 28 and 29). As she sees things, a defense consists in offering a worldview that does two things: it shows the evils it defends against to be consistent with God's existence, and it portrays a way things might actually be (i.e., it is epistemically possible). Her defense is limited in some important ways; in particular, it is especially aimed at explaining the involuntary suffering of innocent, mature, normal adult human beings, deferring the project of showing how the sufferings of (nonhuman) animals, children, and mentally disturbed adults are allowed by a loving God. However, insofar as such creatures are capable of interpersonal relationships, her defense may have importance for these deferred projects.

The partial worldview that Stump offers is one I think she takes to be close to the truth of the matter, even though she does not undertake directly to argue this. Moreover, I intend largely to concede the truth of her understanding of the human soul, not simply *arguendo* or half-heartedly, but because I believe much of it is both wise and true.<sup>6</sup> In any event, I shall be thinking of her view as a candidate (partial) theodicy, rather than merely as a defense.

Here are some features of Stump's candidate worldview. As an elaboration of Aquinas's theodicy (with a significant addition), it accepts Aquinas's view that there are objective standards that measure the flourishing of a human life; these include, *inter alia*, what Aristotle called an *ergon*, or highest natural end: for human beings, loving union with God. But in addition, human beings have subjective ends, desires of the heart, which have value for an individual just because she cares about them. Such desires can, of course, conflict with objective flourishing; when they do, the individual is divided against herself. And so, the ultimate aim of a loving God is to try to bring each soul into a state in which the sat-

4 Into this category I would place John Hick, Marilyn McCord Adams, and Eleonore Stump. Hick, while he follows the general strategy of Irenaeus's theodicy, modifies some of its morally problematic aspects, and holds that all are eventually beatified.

5 I should add that I have become convinced that *The Brothers Karamazov* illumines Dostoyevsky's own response to Ivan – by way of narrative. In this, I want to register agreement with Stump's insistence on the value of narratives to reflection upon such matters. But the task of articulating and evaluating that response (to the extent that this can be discursively done) must await another day.

6 Of course I do not actually accept the theistic bits, even though it is not as if they can be neatly excised from the rest. But I *will*, mostly, accept the theistic bits, *arguendo*, as well.

isfaction of the heart's truest desires is unified with – “folded into” – the highest form of objective flourishing, union with God.

Stump's aim is to show how this can be brought about, and how, in its accomplishment, God can use the very sufferings that threaten permanently and irredeemably to snuff out both objective and subjective well-being (which may require having an individual come to re-assess what she most cares about). In this way, Stump explains how such suffering can be redeemed: it is redeemed if the sufferer comes, ultimately, to appreciate the ineliminable role of that suffering in the accomplishment of a final felicity so good that she prefers having lived the life that includes that suffering as a necessary means, or the best means available to God, to the life she would have lived without it.<sup>7</sup>

Here I propose, first, to examine the moral adequacy of this account as an explanation of innocent suffering, and second, the plausibility of claiming that it is always, or even in general, a true account of what happens to innocent sufferers. Finally, I want to consider whether there are forms of innocent suffering that cannot plausibly be redeemed in this way.

## Reply to Stump

In order to begin, let me return, now, to the Jobian theodicy. There are some rough similarities between the Jobian theodicy and Stump's, but also differences.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most important is that Stump explicitly requires that the suffering be a necessary or best available condition for the achievement of the final state of felicity, and that the sufferer both see this (retrospectively) and, therefore, welcome it. Even so, I think there is a problem here. Even if the sufferer welcomes the role played by her suffering in the larger economy of her life, and so redeems it in this way, a larger problem of justice demands consideration.

A little fable will make this clearer. Rogue Scientist (RS) discovers what promises to be a cure from some terrible malady – Huntington's chorea, say. A successful cure will, without question, avert untold human suffering. The drug works in monkeys, but there is a chance, RG realizes, that it will cause blindness in humans. He needs a subject to test this; unsurprisingly, no one volunteers. So RS recruits his burly lab assistant to kidnap a homeless man, V, and make him an unwilling subject. Unfortunately, V goes blind. Fortunately, RS is able, on the basis of the trial, to tweak the drug so as to make it safe; thousands of lives are saved. Also fortunately for V, RS satisfies V's fondest wish, for, as chance would have it, V's own daughter contracts Huntington's, and RS cures her, also providing V with everything required to make his blind life as comfortable as possible.

Now it is easy to imagine that, ultimately, V judges with hindsight that he got a good bargain: he would have been happy to sacrifice his vision for the sake of his daughter's health. The justice question is: can RS point to this as justifying the kidnapping? This, I trust, no one will affirm. But suppose it were objected that the case is not parallel to Job's: For one thing, RS couldn't foresee that things would turn out this way, and so couldn't have guaranteed the restitution. Altering the story will show that this would not serve. Suppose RS happens to know that V's daughter has the Huntington's gene, but is unable

7 Heaven and hell are also essential elements in Stump's theodicy. I will have more to say about them presently.

8 Stump's own exegesis of the book of Job is not to be confused with what I am calling the Jobian theodicy.



to convince V of it. So V doesn't willingly submit to RS's drug trial, but considers RS vindicated when his daughter actually manifests the symptoms of the disease and is cured by RS. Does *that* show that RS did nothing wrong in kidnapping V?

Perhaps moral judgments will differ here. As Stump (2010, xviii) says:<sup>9</sup>

What does it take to redeem suffering – to defeat evil, as philosophers say? . . .

If, in the end, Mary Magdalene herself would prefer her life with the suffering in it, if she would be unwilling to lose what the loss of the suffering would take from her, then, for her, the suffering is surely redeemed.

Perhaps that is right: perhaps Mary Magdalene's suffering is redeemed *for her*; and maybe that is true, in the relevant sense, even if Mary's preference is an *irrational* one; so much the better if rational. But we should not rest easy in thinking that is all that is at stake in personal suffering.<sup>10</sup> Mary's being reconciled to, even retrospectively glad of, her suffering is surely relevant to whether that suffering is a good thing, but it is not sufficient, even if a necessary condition. For it may nevertheless have been wrong that Mary should suffer, and Mary's joy over what happened to her may in a certain way be misguided. A victim may, for example, simply fail to recognize the true moral character of her victimization.

But should we say that V was victimized or benefitted by his kidnapping? We shouldn't be distracted by the thought that, unlike God, RG *still* couldn't be in a position to *know* that his actions would in the end have consequences that would vindicate the kidnapping in V's eyes. We may suppose that RS has as good reasons as you like, short of knowledge, for reaching that conclusion – strong enough clearly to justify the action on a cost–benefit analysis. Moreover, we may suppose that RS acts out of genuine love and care for V's welfare, and that V comes to recognize this.

Even so, do we not still judge that there is something ethically amiss with RS's plan of action? As I have told the story, RS has consequentialist justification for acting as he does; moreover, there is V's retrospective understanding of his motives and *ex post facto* approval. Nevertheless, in kidnapping V, RS committed an injustice, compounded by the involuntary blinding of V. Even if we agree that V is (in his own eyes and in fact) "made whole" by the rescue of his daughter and RS's love, there is still the moral intuition that the injustice perpetrated by the violation of V's autonomy cannot thereby be erased.

9 I should add that Stump makes an important distinction between two ways in which innocent suffering may be unwillingly undergone. Someone's sufferings are involuntary *secundum quid* if they are endured as a result of the willing pursuit of some enterprise known to carry the risk of that sort of suffering. They are involuntary *simpliciter* if they aren't the consequence of a known risk. The latter is defeated if it contributes to warding off of a greater harm to the sufferer; the former if it contributes to a greater good for her (see Stump 2010, 381–384 and 392–402). V's suffering is involuntary *simpliciter*, and it is defeated, to whatever extent it can be, both by contributing to warding off a greater harm (the death of V's daughter), and by the provision of a greater good (V's joy over the curing of his daughter, and a comfortable life). Stump adds everlasting glory (luminous intrinsic admirableness) to the goods that can justify suffering. V does not enjoy that good (in this life, at least). But then, neither do most innocent sufferers. Stump's own examples – Job, Mary, Abraham, even Samson – become glorified in this life.

10 Of course, the sufferings of nonhuman animals cannot be redeemed in this way in any case, but Stump is restricting herself to normal adult human beings.

That is because the trade-offs here are not purely consequentialist. Good consequences are pitted against deontic evils. Now no one believes that such trade-offs are never justified, even when the beneficiaries do not include the victim of the injustice. Each of us will snatch the loaded rifle from the small child who, having found it ownerless, dearly wants to keep it. So deontic goods, such as the *prima facie* duty not to steal, can be trumped by consequentialist goods: sometimes the ends do justify the means. Still, it doesn't appear that such a serious violation of autonomy as RS's is trumpable in the way the story specifies. Or, at the least, I think we must say this: a universe in which such a serious injustice is the only possible means to an end that justifies those means is a *tragic* universe, a universe so ordered that, however well things turn out in the end, those goods must be bought at the price of significant injustice. Such a universe is one there is a strong reason for God not to actualize.

Some goods can be realized only in such a universe – for example, the joy of seeing undeserved suffering well rewarded, even well beloved, as part of a new kind of appreciation of life. Even so, even if the sting of the injustice has been drawn, there remains the tragic fact that the architecture of such a world entrenches injustice as a necessary means to significant ends.

In his pregnant questions to Alyosha, Ivan seems to be pointing to this idea. He says nothing about the ways heaven might reward the suffering child and wipe away its tears; rather, his concern is for justice: for injustice avenged and expiated. But God could hardly wish to create a world in which restoration of the moral order requires vengeance, and so we might wonder whether a world free of injustice and otherwise exceedingly good is possible.

Faced, as we are, with extraordinary unatoned injustices, and people whose innocent sufferings have patently *not* been refolded, before death, into a flourishing that treasures the suffering, it becomes an essential component of Stump's theodicy that there be an afterlife in which this unfinished business is addressed and the problems remedied. This requires, evidently, at least two strategies. Those who are evil must – if ignorant – be taught the evil of their ways, and then led, if possible, to proper atonement and reconciliation with God.<sup>11</sup> And those who have suffered innocently must come to the sort of understanding of their suffering that Mary Magdalene achieves in this life, according to Stump.

The latter project encounters a serious problem. How (and even whether) serious suffering can contribute to an ultimately beatifying union with God and fulfillment of the heart's desires depends in extraordinarily complex ways upon both the nature of the suffering and upon the character, personality, and other experiences of the sufferer.

There is much we cannot know here, and Stump takes care to depict a considerable variety of types of suffering and individuals who bear those tribulations and are redeemed through them. Nevertheless, the evidence we have, of the kinds and intensity of innocent suffering, and of the character and abilities of those who befall them, strongly suggest the absence of any rational pattern: the distribution of sufferings appears to be *too random* to encourage the notion that they are individually necessary components in the redemptive plans of a providential God. Nor is an appeal to the limitations in our understanding really helpful here. We *do* know *something* about the sorts of sufferers and sufferings that have

11 Thus Stump, in her portrayal of God's interactions with Satan in the story of Job, suggests that God is, *inter alia*, attempting to offer Satan himself as much love and opportunity as possible to repent his rebellion.

happy outcomes; much of that sort of wisdom is essential to the successful rearing of children. But we see all too much suffering that gives no hint of being of that sort. That, to all appearances, there are so *very many* innocent sufferers, in all conditions of life and with every kind of psychological constitution, strongly suggests the improbability that, in this life or the next, God will have found a way for that suffering to be the best condition for the fulfillment of the greatest good for each of those individuals. For, in spite of dramatic variations in relevant factors, terrible suffering is supposed to be a part of the best way God has of bringing into beatitude just those who do suffer. And this is surely relevant to an estimate of the weight of Stump's response to the problem of evil.<sup>12</sup>

### Stump: Further Reflections

I noted that Stump excludes from consideration certain types of suffering: that of nonhuman animals, children, and psychologically abnormal adults. Clearly, these raise distinctive issues.<sup>13</sup> Here I will just briefly mention two. First, the suffering of small children. We can, I think, imagine a person whose terrible suffering early in life catalyzes a history of character development that allows it to be refolded into a flourishing adult career in which it itself is seen as having been instrumentally essential. But we also know of many cases in which nothing of that sort eventuates. This is, perhaps, most dramatically the case when the suffering terminates the small child's life. Stump (1985) suggests that, for all we know, the child is given a postmortem opportunity to continue its development in such a way as to make such refolding possible.<sup>14</sup>

Now this is, theoretically, an attractive hypothesis. But it does suffer from an implausibility similar to that raised at the end of the previous section. We know that a great deal of the suffering experienced by small children is physical suffering (and concomitant psychic damage), suffering caused by terrible diseases, starvation, and the like. And we also know that this suffering is *not* distributed randomly across the earth, but is focused in locations beset by known causes: poverty, drought, social unrest, and so on. But, though in this way nonrandom in his attentions, Death is no respecter of persons. There is no reason to believe, and every reason not to believe, that the ravages of disease and starvation are sensitive to personality differences in ways that would support the hypothesis that, for example, small children in Somalia are naturally endowed with those traits of character that make extreme suffering instrumentally essential for *their* coming to a right relationship with God at a rate far higher than those traits can be found in the children of wealthy folks in industrialized nations.<sup>15</sup>

The mentally ill present a much more difficult range of cases to assess. This is largely because, unless we have ourselves "been there," or have extensive experience with care of the mentally deranged, we can hardly imagine the nature of the suffering they experience

12 Stump is, of course, aware of such difficulties, and essays to provide responses in Stump (2010), chapter 15. I have no space here for adequate discussion, but I believe my point stands.

13 Stump doesn't deny this, of course, but points out that, to the extent that some creatures are persons or quasi-persons, certain aspects of her theodicy might be extended to play a role in the explanation of how their suffering is compatible with divine care (see Stump 2010, 476–477).

14 Stump is, be it noted, circumspectly diffident about this solution (cf. Stump 1985, 410–411).

15 See Fales (1989).

(especially schizophrenia, paranoia, dementia, and severe depression). But we can say with some confidence that many who have these conditions endure more or less unrelenting and horrible suffering of a kind that they are often constitutionally incapable of assessing in constructive ways or learning from, and for whose termination they have no hope. For many of them, too, only an afterlife can offer hope of redemption. Yet it is very difficult to construct a narrative in which such a person, restored to sanity in a hereafter, can come to refold that suffering into a story in which it plays an essential role in their ultimate flourishing. They will, surely, be wildly grateful that they have been restored to sanity, and the darkness lifted from their minds. But how can this kind of suffering become somehow the essential stepping-stone to beatitude? It would be presumptuous to say it cannot be done, if only because we know so little about the phenomenology of this sort of suffering. Nevertheless, I would venture that here, the odds are high – indeed, very high – that many have suffered unnecessarily.

The value of a theodicy to a defense against the problem of evil depends both on how sensitive it is to the intrinsic worth of persons, and on how plausible it is. Mere for-all-we-know-possibility, while it permits escape from clear defeat, is hardly enough to de-fang the argument from evil. The theodicy embedded in Stump's defense deserves admiration for its preservation of individual worth and of the claim that God loves each one of us. But what we do know about our world suggests that it is very likely to be false. There is also another, quite general reason for doubting that the project of theodicy can succeed.

### Nothing But the Best

You are, I know, a connoisseur of fine wines. Every evening, you enjoy a glass or two of the best wines you can afford. But suppose money (and time) were no object: your taste is impeccable, and the very best of wines are within your reach. Then the sensible thing to do is to enjoy the very best. No doubt, you will want also to enjoy some variety: one night the best cabernet, another the best chardonnay, another devoted to champagne. Variety itself is worth pursuing; endless repetition makes for boredom, even of the best.

But what if there were but *one* type of wine worthy of the connoisseur's appreciation: Bordeaux, say. And there were only one "best" Bordeaux, by your impeccable lights. Would it be worthwhile occasionally to stoop to lesser vintages of Bordeaux, for the sake of a change of pace? Perhaps so. How far "down the list" would you be willing to go? That depends on your tolerance for sameness, and on how bad a poor wine was. It seems hardly likely that you would consume wines with toxic qualities, or ones that produced bad hangovers, even if the pleasure you can derive from the drinking of them exceeds the dyspepsia of the consequences. Suppose, however, that your enjoyment of the very best were singularly great, and your tendency to boredom miniscule. In that case, nothing but the best – always and only – seems the right recipe for you.

God is surely incapable of boredom; His taste is impeccable, and He enjoys superlatively whatever is the very best.<sup>16</sup> So, if there is a very best possible world, God creates and enjoys

<sup>16</sup> The analogy may seem inapt, even inept – after all, we are seeking an explanation for God's choice in *moral* terms, not aesthetic ones. But that worry misses the point: the axiological structure of the analogy carries over to moral considerations.

that world (see Chapter 16). If there is a class of “best” possible worlds, with nothing save variety to choose between them, then God will pick one of them, perhaps at random, and create it – or, if He can create more than one possible world, perhaps He will create several or all of these. I have no reason to be committed to God’s taking one or another of these options.<sup>17</sup>

However, I will defend the view that there is a class of best possible worlds: hence the following argument against the possibility of a theodicy:

- (1) There is a best possible world (or class of them).
- (2) This world is not such a world.
- (3) God would create only best possible worlds.
- (4) Therefore, God does not exist.

My first task will be to defend premise (1). That done, the truth of premise (2) will be obvious. To defend premise (3), I will have to parry a plenitude objection – an objection to the effect that, even if God creates the best possible world(s), He will also create every possible world that contains some minimum balance of good over evil – perhaps every world such that it contains more good than evil, or some such thing. We may call such a world an at least minimally worthwhile world, a world such that, were it the only world to exist, things would be the better for that than if no world had existed. I will argue that God, having created one or more best worlds, would have no good reason to bother with such at least minimally worthwhile worlds that fail to be maximally worthwhile.

The *locus classicus* for the argument that there is no best possible world is Aquinas.<sup>18</sup> The essential idea is a rather natural one: created being is finite, and hence any such being, or world composed of such beings, will be at best only finitely good. But, for any world that possesses goodness, there are other possible worlds that possess more goodness.

What does this appeal to divine infinity (as opposed to creaturely finitude) come to? It invokes a set of “maximal” characteristics that God has and that creatures could not have: omniscience and omnipotence, for example, but also perfect goodness, eternity or sempiternality and, perhaps, lack of any potentiality.

What I contest is that a creature could not have these characteristics, and hence that God could not create such a creature. I will call such a creature a *perfect creature* (PC), a creature that is an exact duplicate of God save for one characteristic: aseity. A world consisting of one or more PCs is a best possible world, a world that God both could and should have created; God should have not created worlds of any lesser kind.

First, I will deflect obvious objections to the claim that there could be PCs. One is that there cannot be two beings that are omnipotent: one would have to “get out of Dodge.” This would be true if their wills were not in perfect harmony. But a PC’s will cannot – indeed, essentially cannot – diverge from the divine will, for, like God, a PC’s will is, like God’s, essentially perfectly good and its knowledge essentially maximal. Thus, a PC will necessarily know and want the same things God knows and wants.

17 The more “best” worlds the better – or so it might seem: but then if there is no limit to the number of best worlds, might there after all be no best thing that God can do? On this, see “The Plenum Objection.”

18 See Kretzmann’s (1991) excellent discussion.

Second, it might be objected that God could not create something that was eternal or sempiternal. But this seems false, or at least contrary to what many theists already believe. Thus many theists have traditionally believed that God is responsible for the existence of abstracta, such as universals and numbers. Moreover, these beings (eternally or sempiternally) depend upon God for their existence; they exist because He wills (eternally/ sempiternally) that they do, and sustains their existence. There is no impediment here for the existence of PCs.

## The Objection from Divine Simplicity

A third objection appeals to God's absolute simplicity: there are in God no parts or real distinctions of any kind. A typical explication of this is that His very being is identical with His essence, and each of God's essential properties is identical to the others. Moreover, there is in God no plurality of actions or willings, nor, indeed, between any of His intrinsic characteristics. In particular, then, His aseity is not distinct from, for example, His omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, or eternity. But if that is true, then no being could lack aseity, yet possess God's other perfections – for to lack one is to lack all.

Now it is notoriously difficult to form a coherent conception of absolute divine simplicity – so much so that many theists abjure the doctrine. For them, this objection is without force. But the doctrine does have modern defenders. As the issue is complex, it is impossible for me to engage in a full-dress discussion here. Instead, I will offer a narrow response to the objection, suggesting that it fails, even if sense can be made of divine simplicity.

Let us begin with just one feature of an eminent defense of divine simplicity by Kretzmann and Stump (1985). One of the obvious difficulties with the doctrine of absolute simplicity is the evident nonidentity of the properties of eternity, omniscience, omnipotence, etc. One might make some headway by suggesting that the predicate terms actually denote the same divine property, even though their meanings are distinct and conceptual analysis will not discover coreferentiality (just as “being water” and “being H<sub>2</sub>O” refer to the same property, though this cannot be inferred from the meanings of the terms). But the analogy is for some divine properties inept. That “being water = being H<sub>2</sub>O” is a *posteriori* can be explained by our epistemic distance from the property in question. But it is hard to see how we can be so ignorant concerning the property *being outside of time* (like the number 2), and, say, the property *choosing to create the world*, to imagine how we even *could* think them distinct if they really are not.

More generally, we lose our grip on such properties as *being omniscient*, *being omnipotent*, and so on if we cannot see them as determinates of the determinables *having knowledge*, *having power*, and so on, respectively. But the determinables are uncontroversially distinct. So theists need to explain how their “maxima” can turn out to be identical. Kretzmann and Stump (1985, footnote 9, 379–380) attempt this by suggesting that between any divine perfection  $\Phi$  and the corresponding creaturely  $\Phi$ , “the resemblance must be confined to the formal, abstract aspect of the attribute,” so that “perfect  $\Phi$  and perfect  $\Psi$  might be identical despite the plain difference between  $\Phi$  and  $\Psi$ .” So, it seems, we might rescue the doctrine of divine simplicity by allowing, congruently with the doctrine of analogical predication, that divine attributes aren't, strictly speaking, maxima of their creaturely counterparts, and fail to fall under those determinables.

Suppose we grant this. Does it render incoherent the notion of a PC? I think not. To be sure, if we grant Kretzmann and Stump's conception of divine simplicity, it will be impossible for any creature to possess the divine Attribute. But it surely does not follow that there cannot be maxima of creaturely power, knowledge, goodness, and so on. Moreover, we can understand these just as divine omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence are ordinarily understood. So God can create a PC in such a way that it can do everything that God can do. Perhaps it can even create itself, and sustain itself in existence – but it has not, in fact, done the former. Or perhaps it is necessarily not *a se*, but is necessarily able to do all the other things God can do; that seems coherent. Similarly, a PC will necessarily know all the things that God knows, and necessarily will in ways both impeccable and maximally supererogatory. Again, a PC will essentially share God's relation to time and space, in every world in which these exist: that too seems coherent. So, near as I can tell, a PC is a Possible Creature.

A somewhat different understanding of divine simplicity is proposed by Jeffrey Brower (2008a), who claims that the expression "*a's F-ness*" can be understood to refer to the *truthmaker* for "*a is F*." Such a truthmaker can be a certain property of a thing, but it can also be the thing itself. Thus, *Socrates' justice*, the truthmaker for "Socrates is just," is a particular instance of justice, whereas the truthmaker for "God is just" is just God. But God can also be the minimal truthmaker for "God is merciful," "God is omnipotent," and so on. Thus God's omnipotence = God = God's mercy, and so on. Brower holds that this analysis provides both a necessary and a sufficient condition for divine simplicity. That is not easy to evaluate, because Brower doesn't provide general individuation-conditions for truthmakers.<sup>19</sup>

Let us suppose that Brower is correct, however: so much the better for PCs. Consider PC Dorit. Dorit's nature includes all God's properties, except aseity. On Brower's account, there being such an essence entails no contradiction, so Dorit's a possible being, herself the truthmaker for any proposition "Dorit is *p*," where *p* is an intrinsic property of Dorit's. Dorit, moreover, is then as simple as God Himself. Thus, the divine-simplicity objection fails to rule out perfect creatures on Brower's account as well.

## The Plenum Objection

Fourth, we must address what I will call the plenum objection: even if God can create one or more PCs, He will also, with good reason, create other, lesser creatures and worlds in

19 Brower (2008b, especially section 2.2 and footnote 23) (which defines "minimal truthmaker") has somewhat more to say on this head; what he does say suggests that when a predicate *F* characterizes the nature of *a*, when "*a is F*" is a true essential predication of *a*, then its truthmaker can be just *a* itself. Thus God's intrinsic accidents spell trouble, as Brower recognizes. But there's trouble from the other side as well. Consider Elly, an electron. Elly essentially possesses a charge of  $1.6 \times 10^{-19}$  C and a mass of  $10^{-27}$  g. Indeed, all of Elly's monadic properties are essential to her. So, on Brower's account, Elly's as simple as God is: all intrinsic predications have the same truthmaker, namely Elly herself. But is Elly the minimal truthmaker for these predications? This seems implausible: what makes true "Elly has a charge of  $1.6 \times 10^{-19}$  C" is Elly's charge; Elly's mass makes true "Elly has a mass of  $10^{-27}$  g," and so on, and mass and charge are distinct properties of Elly, conferring distinct powers and placing Elly under distinct laws.



which they may abide. And so, perhaps, He *has* created PCs – but has created us and our world as well, along with any number of other worthwhile worlds: a plenum of (worthy) worlds. Here I advert to my winebibber analogy. A PC world is the best possible world. Might a world with more than one PC be even better? Perhaps – but it is hard to see what value can be added to a world whose value is already infinite, a world containing God and a creature who is as much like God as is divinely possible (after all, theists commonly allow that God would not have erred had He created nothing – if His world contained nothing save Himself). Perhaps such a world could be improved on in this way: perhaps the *telos* of a PC is best satisfied by giving it the opportunity to create – as God does – a PC. I can see nothing against this: perhaps every PC creates another, either eternally or sempiternally. Either way, there is a best possible world or a class of them. In this way, I have defended premise (1) of my argument.

What is at stake here is whether God has sufficient reason to create other, less perfect worlds, *in addition to* His creation of (one or more) PCs. I believe not: at most, God will add to something of infinite value something of only finite value, and furthermore, at least in the case of *this* world, God will have added something containing a very large amount of evil as well. Christians themselves have a vision of the final good of this world – a Kingdom of Heaven – in which the angels and saints, though finite, reside in perfect, eternal harmony with God. But a PC world is like that from the very beginning, and for time without end – except that a PC is greater than any angel or saint, more fully able to participate in the divine nature.

One final objection. Many people will feel that if God had taken my advice and created only a PC world, then He would have somehow cheated us (and many other finite creatures) out of the opportunity to enjoy our lives. Many people are species chauvinists. They believe the existence of human life is a Good Thing – in part, I suppose, because they see their own lives as a gift worth having and being thankful for. It is an easy step to the conclusion that, therefore, the inclusion of humanity in the divine plan is a Good Thing.

But the value created by human existence must be weighed against the evil. Had God a choice between creating human beings and creating another species, endowed just as we are with free will, intelligence, and the capacity to love, and so on, but significantly less prone to evil ways, then surely He should have done the latter.<sup>20</sup>

So first, consider what God's goodness entails respecting the creation of individual human beings. What of all the human beings that God could have created, but did not? Christians seem to be committed to the view that God has no obligation toward *them*, and no morally sufficient reason to create them.<sup>21</sup>

20 Obviously, there is no "trade-off" between goodness of heart and the capacity for love; quite the contrary. According to traditional Christian anthropology, God *tried* to create such a better species in creating us, a species possessed of a good will and evidently better knowledge of God. The puzzle is how such beings, possessed of a will both free and good, could have knowingly let God down so badly. I pass over here the considerable attempts by theologians to explain this.

21 See Adams (1972). Adams is concerned to show that God will not have cheated beings *better* than we are (or at any rate that exist in a better possible world) by refraining from creating them, but the argument applies equally to us. Adams' purpose is to deny that God is morally obliged to create the best possible world, if there is one. But even if he is right about that, this elides the point that God will necessarily always do the best He can, whether or not failure to do it would be morally censurable.

But then, why think that God would be shirking some moral obligation, or diminishing the goodness of the universe as a whole, had He decided to forego humanity in favor of other intelligent creatures? Alternatively, cannot we easily imagine some possible species – intelligent unicorns, say – and suppose that God did not create them? But if He did not, would we on that account deny God's perfect goodness, or, rather, conclude that God does not exist?

Most theists, I should think, would deny that the nonexistence of a possible worthy species counts as a strong argument against the existence of God. But if so, then, presumably, the nonexistence of *Homo sapiens* (which, indeed, might easily have been the case) does not count in favor of God's nonexistence. And so I argue, *ad hominem*, that species chauvinism is a mistake.

This completes my defense of premise (3) of my argument.

## Conclusion

My strategy has been two pronged: to consider, first, what I regard to be the best and most morally sensitive theodicy I am aware of, and to raise serious doubts about whether, in the end, it can succeed; and second, to argue that God – the God of theism – would in any case not have created a world such as ours, because it would have been possible for Him to create the very best, a PC world.

## Acknowledgment

My thanks to Eleonore Stump, Jeff Brower, and two anonymous referees for very helpful comments.

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# Antitheodicy

N.N. TRAKAKIS

A theodicy, paraphrasing John Milton, is a justification of the ways of God to man. (see Chapter 12) More precisely, a theodicy attempts to offer a reasonable or plausible justification of God's permission of evil, and this it seeks to do by delineating what might be (or what are likely to be) God's purposes for allowing evil, these purposes being in effect the greater goods for the sake of which God allows evil. An "antitheodicy" is not the attempt to debunk theodicies by way of showing, for example, that the purported greater goods are not in fact "greater" than the evils they are thought to justify, or that the purported connection between the greater good and the evil is not a necessary or unavoidable one. These kinds of strategies would only show, at most, that a particular theodicy – say, the free will theodicy, or the soul-making theodicy – does not succeed in explaining some, or all, evil (see Chapter 24).

An "antitheodicy," by contrast, aims to show that all theodicies are by nature defective in some important respects, and that these are not the kinds of deficiencies that could be remedied if only we knew more about, say, God's intentions or the workings of the world.<sup>1</sup> The very project of theodicy, on this view, is a nonstarter, which is to say that the problem of evil is not the sort of problem we should be desperately seeking to answer. Rather, the problem itself is the problem. In other words, the way in which the problem of evil is usually formulated rests on various presuppositions and principles, and once the dubious and questionable nature of these is made clear, the problem of evil (as standardly conceived) dissolves back into the ether from which it arose. This is not to say that there is no

1 The term "antitheodicy" is a neologism coined by Braiterman (1998), where he defines antitheodicy as "any religious response to the problem of evil whose proponents refuse to justify, explain, or accept as somehow meaningful the relationship between God and suffering," (p. 31). See also the use of the term in Roth (2004). For Braiterman, "antitheodicy" is a specifically *religious* response to the problem of evil, and it is this understanding of antitheodicy I adopt here. However, the antitheodicy position may also be employed in a nonreligious or antitheist manner, with the aim of showing that the problem of evil renders theistic belief false or irrational.

problem about evil after all, but only that a particular way of looking at and formulating the problem is deeply flawed and so should be made manifest and overcome.

This kind of critique of the project of theodicy is rarely endorsed or even discussed by contemporary “analytic” philosophers. This is a peculiar fact and one difficult to account for, as there does not seem to be any necessary connection between the standard analytic methodology (clarity, precision, use of formal logic, etc.) and the repudiation of antitheodicy. One has to venture toward the fringes of the analytic tradition in order to have a good chance of encountering antitheodacists, where they are especially prominent among the Wittgensteinians – the most illustrious example being D.Z. Phillips (2004), but see also R.F. Holland 1980, ch. 15), David Burrell (2008), and Andrew Gleeson (2012). It remains the case, however, that the antitheodicy cause has found a more hospitable home in the Continental tradition of philosophy (see, e.g., Levinas 1988; Nemo 1998) and among theologians, particularly Jewish theologians writing in the wake of the Holocaust (e.g., Fackenheim 1970; Surin 1986; Tilley 1991; see also Pinnock 2002) (see Chapter 21). It is significant to note, however, that each of these philosophers and theologians has developed the antitheodicy position in their own distinctive way, and so there is no single and simple criticism of theodicy enshrined by the label of “antitheodicy.”

Questioning theodicy in this way, therefore, is not as straightforward as it may initially seem. For in questioning the underlying principles and presuppositions theodacists usually take for granted, or even the very conceptual and moral framework within which they operate, the antitheodacist may well be seeking to open up new or at least neglected paths of pursuing philosophy itself. Indeed, it may be the case that the antitheodical view is best elaborated not in a stand-alone fashion, but as part of a wider metaphilosophical program that investigates the nature, methods, and goals of philosophy and of philosophy of religion in particular. This would imply that there is a reciprocal, but often unacknowledged, relationship between one’s response to the problem of evil and one’s views or assumptions about the nature and goals of philosophy. Perhaps, then, if one hopes to overturn a dominant and heavily ingrained approach to the problem of evil, nothing less than a reconsideration of fundamental metaphilosophical questions will suffice. This is not unusual in philosophy. Some long-standing and particularly intractable philosophical problem – say, the problem of other minds, or the problem of free will and determinism – often pushes us to our limits, compelling us to reevaluate the very framework and categories within which the problem was originally cast. But this I cannot attempt to do here in any comprehensive way. Instead, my goal will be the more modest one of examining some objections to theodicy, from the perspective of the antitheodacist view, without straying too far into the territory of metaphilosophy.

## **The Morality of Theodicy**

The project of theodicy runs into various problems of a distinctly moral sort. One way of putting the problem is to say that theodicy construction undermines morality in some important respects. Alternatively, one may hold that theodicies are built upon assumptions and principles that are morally questionable, if not also socially and spiritually dangerous. As I have said elsewhere (Trakakis 2010, 130), this is not to cast any personal aspersions on theodacists themselves. A theodacist can be a morally upright person in his daily life, but may nonetheless espouse theories that commit him (perhaps without him being fully

cognizant of this) to morally dubious beliefs. Philosophers, thankfully, do not always behave consistently with what they believe: they do not always mean what they say.

The moral problem with theodicies, then, is that they do not countenance and even cohere with many significant dimensions of moral reality or our experience of that reality. There are diverse ways of entering into and explicating this problem, but essentially the problem resides with the “teleology of suffering” adopted by theodacists in their justifications of evil. In other words, theodacists invariably propose a teleological framework wherein suffering has some (God-given) point or purpose (a *telos*), and the ultimate purpose of suffering is almost always taken to be moral in nature – for example, character building, making responsibility possible, or developing compassion.<sup>2</sup>

### *Gratuitous evil*

Various moral criticisms can be leveled against such a teleological or instrumental understanding of evil. One such criticism concerns the category of unjustified or inexplicable evil. Is such evil so much as (logically or metaphysically) *possible*, on the theodacist’s view? The answer is clearly “no”, and this gives rise to the charge of “moral blindness”: theodacies turn a blind eye to what seems obvious and clear to everyone else – that it is at least possible, if not the sad truth of the matter, that there is much evil and suffering in our world that is gratuitous, pointless, or unnecessary with respect to the fulfillment of God’s purposes. One of the fundamental givens of our moral experience, it seems, is that there are evils that strike us as unredeemable, incomprehensible, and inexplicable – not in the (skeptical theist) sense that there are evils that may have some point that we cannot uncover, but rather that many evils are such that they have absolutely no point at all (see Chapter 29). (Colloquially put: “Life is not fair.”) Theodicy, therefore, amounts to the denial of morally surd realities which, as Kenneth Surin puts it, “halt the tongue, afflict the mind with blankness,”<sup>3</sup> and which infuse us with the tragic sense of life where notions of “blame,” “responsibility,” and “explanation” are entirely out of place. (This is perhaps why theodicy flourishes in our blame-driven, litigious culture where playing the victim and looking for a scapegoat is commonplace.)

I can imagine, however, the theodacist replying: “Appearances are just that: appearances, not reality. So, although some evils appear gratuitous to us, this does not necessarily mean that they are in fact gratuitous. A good reason is required to support this inference from appearance to reality (this “noseeum inference,” as Stephen Wykstra calls it), and you have yet to produce such a reason.”

The first thing to note about such a reply is that it is in effect making the Principle of Sufficient Reason – reformulated as the idea that there is a morally sufficient reason (or cause) for everything that happens (or that there is a theistic explanation for every fact) – the default position. But why should we make this our default position? In light of our moral experience, which (as even the theodacist admits) attests to the seeming gratuitousness of much evil, would it not be more reasonable to presume that there is in fact gratuitous evil

2 D.Z. Phillips (2004) has developed a moral critique of theodicy in what I take to be a particularly insightful and demanding way. For a response to Phillips, see Hasker (2008, 42–54).

3 Surin (1986, 84–85). Cf. Felderhof (2004, 402): “What one seems to be asked to do in a theodicy is to demonstrate a teleology in evil which by definition is dysteleological in nature.”

unless we are given good reason to think otherwise? The onus, therefore, may be placed on the theodist, who has the burden of showing that our initial presumptions are misleading.

But the real problem with the theodist's reply is not one concerning argumentative strategies and burden-of-proof considerations. The more intractable problem, rather, lies with the consequences of denying gratuitous evil. First, if every evil is somehow connected to a greater good and we believe (or know) this to be so, then would we not be reduced to an attitude of passivity and fatalism in the face of evil and suffering? (see Chapter 30) Why should I fight against the devastating plague if I believe this to be, say, God's just punishment of sin? Why would I fight against a genocidal regime if I held that only by giving humans the freedom to perform these kinds of terrible evils can God secure certain greater goods? Morality, and specifically our motivation to do what is right, would be undermined if we thought that there is no genuinely gratuitous evil.

This is not a new or revolutionary idea, and even some proponents of theodicy have advocated similar views. For example, John Hick, in his now classic *Evil and the God of Love*, entertains a view of this sort when he asks us to consider the following counterfactual hypothesis:

... try to imagine a world which, although not entirely free from pain and suffering, nevertheless contained no unjust and undeserved or excessive and apparently dysteleological misery. Although there would be sufficient hardships and dangers and problems to give spice to life, there would be no utterly destructive and apparently vindictive evil. On the contrary, men's sufferings would always be seen either to be justly deserved punishments or else to serve a constructive purpose of moral training.

In such a world human misery would not evoke deep personal sympathy or call forth organized relief and sacrificial help and service. For it is presupposed in these compassionate reactions both that the suffering is not deserved and that it is *bad* for the sufferer. We do not acknowledge a moral call to sacrificial measures to save a criminal from receiving his just punishment or a patient from receiving the painful treatment that is to cure him. But men and women often act in true compassion and massive generosity and self-giving in the face of unmerited suffering, especially when it comes in such dramatic forms as an earthquake or a mining disaster. It seems, then, that in a world that is to be the scene of compassionate love and self-giving for others, suffering must fall upon mankind with something of the haphazardness and inequity that we now experience. It must be apparently unmerited, pointless, and incapable of being morally rationalized. (Hick 1985, 334, emphasis in the original)<sup>4</sup>

4 A similar argument has been defended by Peterson (1982, chapters 4 and 5) and Hasker (2004, chapters 4 and 5). In Trakakis (2007, 320–324), I consider this line of thought in Peterson's work but reject it on the grounds that it incoherently supposes that evil may be both pointless and also connected to some great good (which, in this case, consists in the preservation of morality). Does not this objection apply equally to the argument I am presenting here? No, for the upshot of my argument is that the very idea that evil is a necessary means for realizing some greater good makes no moral sense (it fails to cohere with what may be called our standard "moral framework"). In other words, the preservation of morality is not to be seen as a greater good, offsetting the deleterious effects of gratuitous evil. Rather, gratuitous evil and morality form an organic, integral whole, in which case the one cannot be had without the other.

It is tempting to reply, as O'Connor (1995) has, that it is the prevention or amelioration of evil that may well instantiate the requisite greater goods. So, it might be the very fight against genocide that brings about the goods for the sake of which God gives us the freedom to commit horrific evil (O'Connor 1995, 383).

As Berel Dov Lerner (2000, 96) has nicely summarized this world, which he calls “Justland,” it is a world where, objectively speaking, all suffering is:

- (1) not unjust
- (2) not undeserved
- (3) not excessive
- (4) not utterly destructive.

Further, and this time subjectively speaking, all suffering in Justland does not appear to be:

- (5) dysteological
- (6) vindictive
- (7) it will always be viewed as either justly deserved punishment, or else as serving a beneficial purpose.

Lerner remarks that, from an epistemic and psychological perspective, it is not plausible to think that suffering could strike people in the manner described in (5)–(7). As he puts it,

Even if Justland were so fashioned as to demonstrate God’s love and justice to nonomniscient yet rational human observers, such *unbiased* observers are not to be found. The objectively deserved sufferings of charming scoundrels might evoke crises of faith, while the wellbeing of uncharming saints would be attributed to blind luck. In fact, considering people’s factual ignorance and proneness to self-delusion, it becomes quite difficult to imagine a world in which divinely ordained punishment could both *actually be* and *appear to be* completely justified. (Lerner 2000, 96, emphasis in the original)

I think this is mistaken. Lerner is not paying sufficient attention to one of Hick’s hypothetical starting points: the inhabitants of Justland *know* that all suffering serves some greater good (which is why (5)–(7) are the case). But if they know this, then presumably this would correct any disposition they may have to believe otherwise on the basis of, say, a proneness

But, as O’Connor (1995) himself points out (p. 384), if we know that no evil is genuinely gratuitous, then when faced with a case of genocide, we would know that it will lead to a greater good whether we intervene or not, and so we are not morally obliged to help the victims. This, in other words, is to say that whatever goods transpire from our intervention in evil, there is no necessary (but only a contingent) connection between these goods and the evil in question.

O’Connor responds (in O’Connor 1995, 385) by saying that there may be other things that we know that would make it our moral duty to help – as examples, he gives our knowledge that the victims would be happy and less miserable if we helped them than otherwise; our knowledge that a world in which we turn a blind eye to genocide is one that contains more evil overall than a world in which we intervene; and our knowledge that God wishes us to be morally virtuous people who act charitably and compassionately in circumstances such as those under consideration.

But I wonder how far such knowledge would go in providing strong moral motivation, the kind which would compel someone to lay down their life for their neighbor. For even though we would be naturally disposed to alleviate or end the harm someone is suffering, we would also know (in the theodist’s world) that this suffering is connected (and necessarily connected, not merely contingently) to some greater good – and so to prevent the suffering is tantamount to preventing the greater good. This would at least seriously diminish the force of the reasons O’Connor thinks we would have for acting morally to help such victims. And a morality greatly diminished is not much better than a morality entirely undermined.



to self-delusion. Or, we could just assume that the Justlanders' knowledge that all suffering has a God-given purpose has such great evidential force or weight for them that it easily defeats any reason or inclination they may have to believe otherwise. It is important in this respect to note that it need not be the case that the inhabitants of Justland have access to God's intentions for permitting evil. One could imagine a skeptical theist version of Justland, call it Justland\*, for which (1)–(4) hold true, but not (5)–(7). In other words, this would be a world where suffering always serves a greater good, but suffering also appears to be pointless. Suppose, however, that inhabitants of Justland\* also know that all suffering is not unjust, not undeserved, not excessive, and not utterly destructive. But then, insofar as they have even a modicum of rationality, Justlanders\* would reason that suffering, even though it appears to be pointless, does in reality serve some point, irrespective whether that point can be understood or known. In that case, there is no need to assume (*contra* Lerner) that any instance of suffering could both *actually be* and *appear to be* completely justified. As long as it is known that all suffering is in reality completely justified, that will suffice to occasion the morally debilitating consequences identified by Hick (in the second paragraph quoted earlier).<sup>5</sup>

Another consequence of denying gratuitous evil is that this inevitably leads to the denial of evil *per se*. This is perhaps most obvious when theodiscists say (in imitation of Romans 8:18; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:17) that the sufferings experienced now are *trivial* in comparison with the glorification to be experienced in heaven, or when they say that whatever sufferings we undergo in this life will be more than *compensated for* (or “outweighed”, or

5 Lerner goes on to argue that even in cases of divinely ordained suffering or punishment, we may have a duty to interfere with God's plans and to help the sufferer (Lerner 2000, 98–101). I do not have the space here to discuss Lerner's argument, other than to say that his main hypothetical scenario given in support of his argument – where the arsonist Jack is punished by God by (predictably!) burning down Jack's home with him in it, while the bystander Jill races in to rescue Jack – simply assumes (as Lerner himself states) that Jill “must always *try* to help Jack” (Lerner 2000, 100), regardless of the consequences of her doing so. But that is not obviously true. If rescuing Jack amounts to confounding God's plan to inflict well-deserved punishment on Jack, and Jill knows this to be the case, then why should Jill even try to help? Analogously, why should I try to help rescue someone from prison who has been correctly placed there for serial murder? (What Lerner has overlooked, and failed to specify, is what Jill knows about God's plans. If she knows what the theodiscist knows then, as Hick would say, she could not “acknowledge a moral call to sacrificial measures to save a criminal from just punishment.”)

Clement Dore (1974) adopts a very different strategy in showing how a theist committed to a greater-good theodicy can respond to this type of critique. Dore notes that, “What is needed is a way of showing how a rational theodiscist could hold both (a) that God can be justified in causing suffering on the ground that it serves good ends and (b) that men cannot be justified in causing suffering on the same ground” (Dore 1974, 361). This difference between God and men he abbreviates as “D.” He then goes on to claim that the relevant difference is that God *knows* that Q is true, whereas we could only *believe* that it is true (or believe it on faith):

Q: The value of the ends that (the theodiscist holds) are served by suffering is great enough to outweigh the suffering that serves those ends.

Dore goes on to consider some objections to D, and in the concluding section of his paper, he concedes that if we *knew* that Q is true, then the relevant difference between God and us would be removed, and so we (like God) would be morally justified in, say, causing suffering that would evoke desirable responses. The fundamental problem with Dore's case is his assumption that God knows that Q is true. If the antitheodiscist view I develop here is correct, then Q is false (or, better, enshrines a particular way of thinking about morality that is deeply flawed), and so is not something that can be known to be true.

“defeated”) in the afterlife. When such things are said – and unfortunately such things are often said blithely and casually without much thought having gone into exactly what is being proposed and implied – a subtle but definite shift in moral perspective is taking place. This is a shift so significant that the very reality or at least the horror of much evil comes under doubt.

The theodocist states that the time will come when we will be able to view our sufferings *sub specie aeternitatis*. This will be the perspective we will enjoy in the eschaton when we find ourselves experiencing the postmortem beatific vision, and moreover it will provide us with the *correct* perspective on our sufferings – it is not as though we will then be looking at our earthly lives through “rose-colored glasses,” but rather we will finally be seeing things as they truly are (and perhaps we would not, at that future time, even wish that the past were different). What this means – and it is here that theodocists have not paid close enough attention to the implications of what they say – is that what we initially regarded as evil is not so bad after all.<sup>6</sup> But to come to see earthly evils in this way is to end up with a moral perspective on the world wherein evil does not really exist, or at least where the moral categories we customarily deploy have been radically displaced and reconfigured. For evil that is “not so bad after all” is not genuinely evil. We might in such circumstances continue to countenance toothaches and twisted ankles as “evils,” but there would be no room for the kinds of evils which give rise to the revolt and indignation of a Job or an Ivan Karamazov – what Marilyn Adams calls “horrendous evil,” evils such as child abuse and genocide, which threaten to dehumanize its victims (and perpetrators) and thus to reduce human life to meaninglessness. This sort of evil is nothing if its severity and magnitude, if the devastation and trauma it leaves in its wake, are downplayed and minimized. That is why, I might add, the theodocist’s teleological framework of goods outweighing evils has been criticized for “not taking suffering seriously”: one cannot take horrific evil seriously if one refuses to acknowledge the very qualities that make such evil so repulsive and shocking.<sup>7</sup>

6 Consider, for example, the view of Stephen T. Davis (a proponent of the free will theodicy) that “in the kingdom of God, all evil will be overcome. People will be able to look back from the perspective of the kingdom of God and see that their past sufferings, no matter how severe, prolonged, or undeserved, have been overcome and *no longer matter*” (Davis 2001, 84, emphasis mine). Davis makes a similar point in a later paper, where he initially concedes that “the Holocaust of the World War II era was genuinely evil. The world would have been better – much better! – had it never occurred,” and then *immediately after* writes that “The Holocaust, like all other evils (so I believe), will be redeemed in the sense that some day it will no longer be a source of suffering (even in memory); it will *fade away, pale into insignificance*” (Davis 2004, 272, emphasis mine).

7 The view that the very condition of having a moral perspective is the ability to recognize at least some evils as unjustifiable is also defended by Wachterhauser (1985). He aptly heads his paper with a quotation from Isaiah 5:20: “They call evil good and good evil. And they put darkness for light and light for darkness.” He then goes on to argue that the view that all cases of apparently unjustified evil are in reality cases of justified evil is one that ultimately leads to a profound moral skepticism. He points in particular to the kinds of terrible evils recounted by Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and argues that “any *moral* point of view has to recognize evils of this particular type as morally unjustifiable if it is to be taken seriously as a *moral* point of view” (Wachterhauser 1985, 172). His point is not that such evils are self-evidently unjustifiable in the same way in which logical truths are self-evidently true, but that such evils “are clear and undeniable cases of unjustifiable evil, *if anything at all is*” (Wachterhauser 1985, 172, emphasis in the original). If a putative moral theory cannot accommodate this, then it lacks the ability to distinguish genuine (i.e., unjustifiable) evil from good and so forfeits its right to even be called a *moral* theory.

### *Treating persons as ends*

The second morally objectionable characteristic of theodicies is their tendency to treat people as only means to some end, and not as ends in themselves. This way of putting the matter is, of course, to allude to Kant's Categorical Imperative in its so-called humanity formulation, which states that we should never act in such a way that we treat the humanity in ourselves and others *merely* as a means, but always as an end in itself. I emphasize "merely" because the prohibition is not on using people as means to our ends (something we regularly do, as when I use the services of a taxi driver to get to the airport), but on using people simply and only as means without treating them as ends-in-themselves (which would happen if, for example, I ran out of the taxi without paying the fare, thereby disregarding the rights of the driver to financial compensation for his work). This principle, which Kant thought was fundamental to morality, enshrines the idea of "respect for persons," giving proper regard to the absolute worth and value that inheres in the humanity of human beings (for Kant, it is the specific human capacities of rationality and autonomy of will that are the source of respect and absolute value). So, are theodicies guilty of disregarding or not paying due respect to the humanity of human persons?

Theodicies that seem most obviously guilty of this are those that hold that God may allow a person A to suffer evil E for the sake of some greater good G, even if G is not something that A can share or experience. It is sometimes held, for example, that God permits the abuse and murder of infants for the sake of the greater good of human free will, a good that infants of course have no share in. Theodicies of this sort flout the Kantian imperative, even if it is further stipulated by the theodicist that the sufferer in the relevant cases is duly compensated by (e.g.) being granted a heavenly afterlife. And this is because the individuals in question (in this case, the infants) are treated as wholly expendable – their worth and dignity, their well-being and interests, are sacrificed for some greater good that bears no relation to them.<sup>8</sup>

It is for reasons such as this that a consensus has emerged among contemporary philosophers of religion that a theodicy, if it is to be morally adequate, must hold instead that *God has the right to allow person A to suffer evil E for the sake of some greater good G only if G is something which A can share or experience*. William Rowe (1986, 244) has expressed this view as follows:

Unless we are excessively utilitarian, it is reasonable to believe that the goods for the sake of which O [i.e., the theistic God] permits much intense human suffering are goods that either are or include good experiences of the humans that endure the suffering. I say this because we normally would not regard someone as morally justified in permitting intense, involuntary suffering on the part of another, if that other were not to figure significantly in the good for which that suffering was necessary.<sup>9</sup>

8 If you think this is incorrect and that compensation is sufficient, then the morally counterintuitive result that follows is that God could deliberately inflict serious harm on someone for the sake of some good shared only by others, and yet God, simply by granting the sufferer a heavenly afterlife as compensation, has done all that is required to treat that person with the kind of basic dignity and respect that is consistent with treating them as an end-in-themselves.

9 For similar views, see Stump (1985, 433), Alston (1991, 48), and Adams (1999, 29–31). Cf. Plantinga (2000, 493–494).

Call the idea expressed by Rowe *the sufferer-centered requirement*, or SCR for short. SCR has not gone unchallenged, and the objections to it usually take the form of counterexamples purporting to show that, under certain conditions, it is permissible to allow someone to suffer some sacrifice of their individual interests for the sake of a common good. But, as I have argued elsewhere (Trakakis 2007, 177–179), there are ways of modifying SCR so as to make it both invulnerable to these counterexamples and consistent with our moral intuitions about the dignity and value of human life. In any case, what I wish to highlight is that lying behind SCR is Kant's Categorical Imperative, or something quite like it: to treat an individual as an end-in-themselves is to respect and protect their interests and well-being at all times and at all costs – and this means that the dignity and worth of a person cannot simply be sacrificed or traded off for the sake of some greater good (the “system,” the Cause, God's master plan, etc.). But then do not SCR-type theodicies avoid the objection from moral instrumentalism or expendability I have been making?

This gets tricky, and the answer may depend on the precise connection between the specific good G that is achieved by God and the evil E undergone by person A for the sake of G. Are we to suppose that there is a (logically or metaphysically) necessary connection between G and E in the sense that God's realization of G and his bestowal of G on A could not be achieved without God permitting A to suffer E? The least favorable situation for the theodist is one where a necessary connection of the requisite sort is lacking. For in that case, the individual's suffering is merely useful, but not necessary, for bringing about the greater good, and so the individual becomes an expendable pawn in a system with goals and purposes larger than and alien to those he has chosen for himself. Let us assume, then, that there is indeed a necessary connection between G and E. In that case, it may be thought that the objection from expendability can be overcome, for in such a scenario, A's suffering of E is the only way in which God can secure a greater good that he grants to both A and others.

But now consider the famous challenge that Ivan poses to his brother Alyosha in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Imagine that you yourself are erecting the edifice of human fortune with the goal of, at the finale, making people happy, of at last giving them peace and quiet, but that in order to do it it would be necessary and unavoidable to torture to death only one tiny little creature, that same little child that beat its breast with its little fist, and on its unavenged tears to found that edifice, would you agree to be the architect on those conditions, tell me and tell me truly? (Dostoyevsky 1993, 282)

The greater good in this case is human happiness, and we are asked to imagine that this is a good that could only be achieved through the torture and death of a child. Let us assume also, in line with SCR, that the greater good of human happiness is one that even the child who has been victimized will partake of (even though Ivan himself does not explicitly make this concession). Nevertheless, this remains a cheap-and-easy way of treating the humanity of persons. Even if the child is compensated in this way for its suffering, we would continue to doubt that the architect of this system is really seeing the child as an end-in-themselves, as a human being whose humanity has an unconditional and absolute worth and sanctity. I gather that we would, instead, respond in disgust and revulsion at the way the child is

being viewed and treated. This is why Alyosha, a devout monk, answers Ivan's invitation by refusing "to be the architect on those conditions."<sup>10</sup>

## Nonmoral Objections to Theodicy

Thus far, I have only indicated some moral problems with the project of theodicy. However, antitheodicy is not (or need not be) an exclusively moral critique of theodicy, and indeed it is the nonmoral criticisms of theodicy that may be more cogent and far-reaching. Such nonmoral criticisms would include metaphilosophical considerations, such as those mentioned at the beginning of this article, where the connections between theodicy and certain practices of philosophy are made explicit and put in question. Relevant here is the customary distinction between the "theoretical problem of evil" and the "practical problem of evil," where the theoretical problem is the intellectual matter of determining the rationality or truth of theistic belief in the light of the facts about evil, while the practical problem concerns the existential and experiential difficulties evil creates for love and trust toward God (or the difficulties in combating evil and alleviating suffering). Theodacists tend to uphold a distinction of this sort, and they typically see themselves as addressing the theoretical problem of evil only – the practical problem is regarded as the business of priests and social workers. Defenders of theodicy (such as O'Connor 1988) add that the worries of the antitheodacist would be legitimate only if the theodacist were using philosophical analysis to resolve or assuage the practical hardships created by evil, something of course they never attempt to do. But this quickly leads one down the path of metaphilosophy. For if one conceives of philosophy as something more than a purely theoretical enterprise, and perhaps as something that has an inextricable personal and social dimension, then any such

10 As David Bentley Hart (2005, 42) puts it, "Ivan's is a profoundly and almost prophetically Christian argument."

But what if, as one referee objected, the alternative to the child suffering and receiving the greater good (of everlasting peace and happiness) was that no one received this greater good? Would not this alternative be worse – that is, worse for the child and everyone else concerned? And if it would be worse, and if the only way to secure the greater good is through the child's suffering, then it is not clear that the child's worth and sanctity are compromised.

I think it is important, in abstract discussions of these sorts, to bring the discussion (at least occasionally) down to the "phenomenological" level where the cases under consideration are seen and "felt" for what they are, thus enabling us to better appreciate their qualities and meanings. The case in question here is the torture to death of a child. If this were to be fleshed out in greater detail by means of a phenomenological account of the kind a skilled novelist or filmmaker is able to produce, my suspicion is that the very thought that *it is morally permissible to inflict horrific suffering on a child so as to bestow everlasting happiness on the whole of humanity* could only be regarded (as least by someone with their moral faculties intact) as repulsive and "beyond the pale." And what, in part, underlies such reactions is the thought that the infinite value had by the human person (as a creature made in the image and likeness of God, a Christian might add) entails that a person should never be treated in this fashion.

Put somewhat differently, the problem lies with the very way in which the objector (like Ivan) sets up his imaginary scenario in terms of a dilemma: either the child suffers and everyone is saved, or the child does not suffer and no one is saved. When Alyosha answers with a "No," he is rejecting the entire setup that Ivan has constructed. Similarly, the objector's dilemma should be rejected as a false one – and it is false because it already assumes what is being contested, namely, the teleological framework wherein God permits or inflicts evils for the sake of greater goods.

hard-and-fast demarcation between the theoretical and practical problems of evil will seem dubious and artificial, if not also morally and socially harmful.<sup>11</sup> Theodicy and metaphilosophy are therefore closely linked, and highlighting these links can bring to the fore deficiencies lying at the heart of the theodical program that are not (simply) moral in nature.

A further nonmoral deficiency with theodicy (but one that is, again, not unrelated to issues in metaphilosophy) concerns the concept of God usually at play in discussions of theodicy. The problem in this case is that theodicies, such as those one finds in the work of John Hick and Richard Swinburne, presuppose an objectionably anthropomorphic conception of God. The objection, to be sure, is not with anthropomorphic images of the divinity *per se*, but with their philosophically undisciplined and hermeneutically untutored use. When the anthropomorphisms of the Old Testament, for example, are taken too literally, God begins to look more like one further creaturely item in the universe, rather than the uncreated source of the universe. A similar charge has been leveled against the God of theodicy, who – in line with “perfect-being theology” – is conceived as an absolutely perfect being, a being whose greatness cannot be surpassed or even matched, or to borrow Anselm’s well-known phrase, “a being than which none greater can be conceived”. On this view, as explicated by one of its foremost defenders, Thomas Morris (1987, 1991), one begins with the idea of God as maximally great or perfect, and then from this conception of deity, one deduces all of God’s core or essential properties. But to determine which properties are to count as perfections or “great-making,” the perfect-being theologian typically looks to see which properties are considered excellences or virtues in the case of humans. Given that properties such as power, knowledge and goodness would generally count as great-making in humans, the magnitude of each such property is then infinitely extended (e.g., the limited and fallible knowledge of humans is replaced by unlimited and infallible knowledge, or omniscience) and finally that property, suitably maximized, is ascribed to God. Herein lies the anthropomorphic character of this methodology. God, on the perfect-being model, looks very much like a human being, albeit a quite extraordinary one, one inflated into infinite proportions: “the biggest thing around,” as David Burrell (2004, 220) puts it. The gulf between Creator and creatures may be great, but it is not an absolute one, for it is only one of degree. “Such a view,” Barry Miller (1996, 3) states, “succeeds in presenting God in terms that are comfortingly familiar, but only at the price of being discomfitingly anthropomorphic.”

This raises the question of how a conception of God is to be developed that not only avoids being “discomfitingly anthropomorphic,” but which also helps to provide a satisfactory resolution of the problem of evil without renouncing commitment to divine providence (that is, the idea of God being actively involved in, and lovingly governing, the world). Nonanthropomorphic conceptions of God abound, from entirely nonpersonal versions of theism (such as the pantheist identification of God with the world or all-there-is) to more traditional theistic views, such as the Thomist notion of God as “pure act” and *ipsum esse subsistens* (subsistent being itself). The significant question, for our purposes at least, is how much help such ways of thinking about God can provide in resolving or grappling with the problem of evil. This is an area of debate in need of greater attention, as the contemporary discussion on the problem of evil rarely ventures beyond a narrow range of

11 This line of thought is developed in Trakakis (2008, 185–188), following Surin (1986).

conceptions of God (what William Rowe has called “restricted standard theism”). In any case, I would venture to suggest that at least some nonanthropomorphic conceptions of God can provide significant aid in helping to buttress the antitheodical position.

Consider, for example, the view (commonly upheld by anthropomorphites) that God shares a moral community with us – which is to say that God’s morality is essentially the same as our morality, and so there are moral principles that are universally applicable, that is, applicable to both human beings and any divine beings there are. But let us suppose that the assumption that God shares a moral community with us is false. Various reasons may be given for rejecting this assumption. One may defer, for example, to the doctrine of divine simplicity, according to which God has no parts or composition, and so is absolutely simple. On this view, God is not so much as good but goodness itself, or the standard of goodness. But in that case, there are no moral standards independent of God that could be relied upon to pass judgment on God, as the theodist is wont to do. Alternatively, one may argue that God’s goodness is metaphysical and not moral in nature – in which case, once more, God is not subject to moral evaluation or criticism (see Davies 2004, 226–230). As this indicates, the theodical project can be undermined not merely by exposing its moral failings, but also – and possibly more potently – by questioning its theological foundations.

The foregoing, however, are only some objections that could be made against theodicy. Other problems, worthy of further exploration, include the difficulty theodicies have in allowing for – and indeed emphasizing the importance of – certain reactive attitudes in the face of great suffering. When undergoing or witnessing a particularly heinous instance of evil or injustice, we assume we have the “right to grieve,” to be sad and disappointed, if not also to be angry and raised to revolt and indignation, even to be angry and cry out against God. But protesting against evil in this way seems to be ruled out in advance by theodicy. For in holding that everything is permitted or ordained by God for a good reason, theodicy recasts reactions such as grief and protest as (at best) natural but short-sighted or (at worst) sinful and blasphemous.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, there are also various problems that the antitheodist must address. If, for example, theodicy construction is not a viable response to the problem of evil, then what possible (philosophical and religious) responses remain? Surely we are not reduced to silence (though silence can be appropriate, at times), in which case the question as to what counts as a satisfactory response cannot be bypassed.<sup>13</sup> A further potential problem with the antitheodicy view concerns the moral and practical (or existential) consequences of upholding such a view. It might be argued, for example, that theodicies, in outlining the providential plan God has for his creatures, help to give meaning, hope, and consolation to sufferers; whereas the antitheodist, by refusing the very practice of theodicy, lacks the resources to address sufferers in terms of meaning and hope, and so is committed to a nihilistic picture of the world as utterly random and chaotic, and of human life as lacking

12 For the development and defense of a “protest theodicy,” see Roth (2001), who presents his theodicy of protest “as a form of antitheodicy” (p. 4). Cf. Hasker (2008, 39–40), who contends that the theodist can make room for “the existential need for protest against God,” but not “protest solidified into a formal belief system,” as happens in Roth’s case.

13 One possible line of response would emphasize the notion of life as an unmerited gift, where “there is no entitlement that could constitute the basis for a complaint” (Felderhof 2004, 406).



any intrinsic worth or purpose. The challenge, then, for the antitheodist is to show how his view of evil as (in some sense) absurd and pointless does not have these unwelcome consequences.<sup>14</sup>

## Acknowledgments

My thanks to two anonymous referees for their many helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

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14 Another argument against the antitheodicy view, endorsed by Søvik (2008) and Simpson (2009), is that antitheodicy (or at least “moral antitheodicy”, the moral critique of theodicy) begs the question by assuming from the outset that various beliefs about the relationship between God and evil are false.

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Part III

SKEPTICAL  
RESPONSES



# A Brief History of Skeptical Responses to Evil

T.M. RUDAVSKY

Then I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun; because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it. (Ecclesiastes 8:17)

## Introduction: Contemporary Skeptical Responses Contextualized

The question of why the righteous suffer dates back to the Book of Job and remains one of the most intractable issues in the philosophy of religion. Most generally, the very concept of a caring deity who is both omniscient and omnipotent gives rise to a logical dilemma, one problematized by Hume in his *Dialogues on Natural Religion*: if God is omniscient, then God knows past, present, and future contingents; if God is omnipotent, then God can actualize any state of affairs; if God is benevolent, then presumably God wishes the best possible state of affairs for God's creatures; and yet we cannot help but recognize the basic fact that the righteous suffer. And so, given the ineluctable reality of human suffering, either God is not omniscient, or not omnipotent, or not benevolent (see Chapter 2). The problem of evil thus comprises a number of issues related to divine omniscience and omnipotence: the general problem of logical fatalism, the problem of God's foreknowledge of human events and the relation of this knowledge to free will, and particular theological difficulties centering on the notions of divine providence and retribution.

In this chapter, I trace various skeptical responses to the problem of evil with a focus on the position that has come to be known in contemporary circles as "skeptical theism." Skeptical theists are theists who are skeptical about a human being's ability to make informed judgments about God's intentions based on events/actions in the natural order (see Chapter 29). They emphasize God's inscrutable nature and argue that there may be

reasons for God's actions or intentions that transcend our finite, limited understanding. Echoing the prophet Isaiah, skeptical theists agree with the sentiment "my thoughts are not your thoughts/nor are your ways my ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth/so are my ways higher than your ways/and my thoughts than your thought" (Isaiah 55:8–9). Similar sentiments are expressed by Paul, who exclaims "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11:33).

Ensnared in the context of what Morris has termed "perfect being theology," skeptical theists respond to the claim that the existence of gratuitous evil threatens the unity and cohesiveness of God's great-making qualities (Morris 1991). These great-making qualities include God's omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence, and perfect freedom. Skeptical theism has traditionally been construed as a response to the evidential argument from evil, the most influential of which was presented by William Rowe who, in a number of important and influential articles, argues that the existence of evil lowers the probability of God's existence on the grounds that a deity with the earlier-mentioned great-making qualities would not have sufficient reason to create/permit evil (see Rowe 1979; 1996; 2006) (see Chapter 4). In other words, Rowe's evidential argument claims that there are certain facts about evil that cannot be adequately explained in light of the deity's supposed great-making qualities. Among the many responses to Rowe's evidential argument, philosophical theologians have questioned both the theological and the factual premises.

Questioning the former has led to a reconceptualization of the divine qualities, in particular divine omniscience, leading to what has become known as "open theism," according to which God's omniscience does not in any impinge upon human freedom, and God's knowledge of the future is open-ended (Pinnock *et al.* 1994; Hasker 2004) (see Chapter 17). Questioning the latter introduces what has come to be known as skeptical theism. More specifically, skeptical theists zero in on Rowe's inference that from the fact that no good state of affairs we *know of* could morally justify that being's permitting instances of intense human/animal suffering, it is *likely* that no good state of affairs is such that would justify that being (See Rowe 2006, 82). But this inference is precisely the target for skeptical theists, starting with Stephen Wykstra.

Stephen Wykstra's response, articulated in an influential paper "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Evil," is that we are simply not in an epistemic position to judge God's actions (Wykstra 1996). Wykstra accuses Rowe of instituting what he calls the "noseeum" inference, moving from "so far as I can tell, there is no x" to "there is no x" in order to make his antitheological claim. According to Wykstra, Rowe's argument is in fact based on the further assumption (Rowe's Noseeum Assumption; RNA) that "if there are goods justifying God's permission of horrendous evil, it is likely that we would discern or be cognizant of such goods." But RNA is precisely what Wykstra and other skeptical theists deny, claiming that the gulf between our limited, finite cognitive abilities and God's infinite wisdom prevents us from understanding God's actions, and more particularly, prevents us from understanding God's reasons for permitting what to us appears to be instances of gratuitous evil: "it is entirely expectable – given what we know of our cognitive limits – that the goods by virtue of which this Being allows known suffering should very often be beyond our ken" (Wykstra 1996, 91).

Skeptical theism as formulated by Wykstra and his contemporaries thus refers to the position that because humans lack sufficient knowledge or information to discern God's reasons for acting or refraining from acting in any particular instance, we cannot infer that

there are not in fact good reasons for God's acting in those ways. Further, because we cannot determine whether there exist good reasons for God's acting in ways that might *appear* to be evil, we cannot conclude that any particular instance of evil is gratuitous (McBrayer, forthcoming). The skeptical theist thus rejects the "noseeum" claim that if we cannot see/understand God's reasons for allowing evil, there must be no reason, and so at least some of the evils are gratuitous.

In what follows, I shall try to develop the roots of skeptical theism in classical sources, starting with the articulation of the position in the Book of Job. Our focus is not just on skeptical theism in the narrow sense as characterized by Wykstra, but on the whole range of skeptical-type responses to arguments from evil, concentrating upon two interrelated strands in the history of philosophy: medieval discussions of Job that emphasize the limits of human understanding, and a second strand of apophatic theology that emphasizes the otherness of the deity. The first strand emphasizes the finitude of human intellect, while the second spells out the linguistic and epistemological implications of our finite inability to come to know an infinite being.

Not surprisingly, the problems associated with skeptical theism were already confronted by earlier philosophers. Contemporary skeptical theists have often appealed to the "parent analogy," namely, the view that God's vision compared with our own, is analogous to that of a parent to a one-month-old human infant. But as we shall see in Maimonides and Aquinas, this defense raises serious issues regarding our relationship with an omnipotent deity, as it eliminates the potential for a close relationship between humans and God. How mysterious, how totally other, can our relationship with such a being be before it is affected deleteriously?

Further, how do we avoid having skeptical theism turn into global skepticism? (See Chapter 31.) This is the problem faced by Descartes, as I shall argue later. If our knowledge of God's actions is extremely limited, how can we be certain we know, for example, that God would not deceive us? Skeptical theists, according to McBrayer, face a dilemma: "If noseeum inferences are bad, then the skeptical theist is right about the failure of the problem of evil, but she can't know that there are no tricky leprechauns who are constantly deceiving us. If noseeum inferences are good, then it is reasonable to believe that there is an external world, but, so too is it reasonable to believe that there are gratuitous evils" (McBrayer, forthcoming).

## Skeptical Theism and the Book of Job

Job's story is well-known: Job is a good person who is tested by Yahweh/God (via Satan), undergoes many physical and emotional trials, and does not give up his belief in God; at the end of the book, Yahweh/God appears to Job out of the whirlwind and chastises him, and the book ends with Job's being rewarded by God. Many attempted theodical solutions are adduced throughout the book. Job's own position, that evil attends to both the righteous and the wicked indiscriminately, is supported by his contention that his suffering is undeserved. His three friends offer pietistic explanations of Job's torment that reinforce the notion that ultimately, Job's suffering is deserved justified: according to Eliphaz we simply cannot understand the correlations between our actions and punishment; Bildad argues that if we do not deserve to suffer in this life but do, we will be rewarded in the



afterlife; and Zophar emphasizes the immutable and absolute will of God. The stranger Elihu then appears and describes the three preceding speeches as senile drivel, and introduces the intercession of an angel; this angel is responsible for restoring an individual to what Elihu calls the best of states, and neutralizes the suffering. Finally, after Job's repudiation of his friends, Yahweh/God appears. But as many commentators have noted, Yahweh/God ignores Job's request for an explanation and subjects Job to questioning of His own with no attempt to explain the situation: "the complete evasion of the issue . . . must be the poet's oblique way of admitting that there is no satisfactory answer available to man, apart from faith" (Pope 1973, lxxx). Note that Yahweh/God makes no accusations against Job except for having spoken out of ignorance; after Yahweh/God's theophany, to which we shall return later, Job realizes that he had spoken from ignorance and he recants, "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent of dust and ashes," reflecting a newly acquired status that enables him to both understand and endure his situation with equanimity (Job 42:6). This twofold ability – understanding and perseverance – brings about his ultimate salvation and the salvation of his family.

The passages in which God appears out of the whirlwind (known generally as Theophany) reinforce Job's ignorance. Yahweh/God's tone is one of sarcasm, of rebuke, stressing the total contrast between the human and divine spheres. God repeatedly asks Job questions that he (Job) cannot answer: "I will question you, and you shall declare to me" (Job 38:3); "Do you know?" (Job 38:33; 39:1, 2); "Do you observe?" (Job 39:1); "Can you number" (Job 39:2); "Where were you?" (Job 38:4); "Tell me, if you have understanding" (Job 38:4); "Surely you know" (Job 38:5); but of course, Job does not know, cannot observe, has not been, hence cannot understand. God's attacks reinforce not only the point that these natural events are beyond Job's ken, but that the very act of creation is inscrutable to human minds. How can a mere human being even begin to understand what it takes to create a world such as our own?

Have you entered the springs of the sea,  
Walked in the recesses of the deep?  
(Job 38:16)

By what power is the flood divided,  
The east [wind] spread over the earth?  
(Job 38:24)

Who cleft a channel for the downpour,  
A path for the thunderbolt?  
(Job 38:25)

Do you know the celestial statutes,  
Can you determine his rule on earth?  
(Job 38:33)

In all these passages, Yahweh/God emphasizes not only Job's inability to understand both the inner workings of nature and the outer workings of cosmogony, but also the providential wisdom required to "make it all work." These passages are followed in chapter 39 with countless examples of providence according to which God rules nature.

After these speeches, Job recognizes his littleness and resolves to talk no further:

Lo, I am small, how can I answer you?  
 My hand I lay on my mouth;  
 I have spoken once, I will not reply;  
 Twice, but I will say no more.  
 (Job 40:4–5)

But Yahweh/God is not satisfied, and embarks upon a second set of speeches, in which omnipotence is reinforced at the expense of justice:

Would you annul my judgment,  
 Condemn me that you may be justified?  
 Have you an arm like God,  
 Can you thunder with a voice like his?  
 (Job 40:8–9)

As if challenging Job to a duel, Yahweh/God urges Job to

Deck now yourself with grandeur and majesty;  
 Be arrayed in glory and splendor . . .  
 Tread down the wicked where they stand.  
 Bury them in the dust forever;  
 Bind them in the infernal crypt.  
 Then I will acknowledge to you  
 That your own right hand can save you.  
 (Job 40:10; 12–14)

Yahweh/God is inviting Job to assume the divine attributes, if that were humanly possible (which of course it is not) to punish the wicked, and only when he has accomplished what God has presumably neglected to do, does Job have the right to chastise God and save himself. After the second speech, Job confesses to having uttered “what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3). Job has learned that the proper response in the face of divine omnipotence is silence. On this reading, “the message of the whole book is deeply skeptical, agnostic, suspicious of man’s claims to insight into the highest mysteries” (Wilcox 1989, 13).

This deep skepticism is reinforced in the Hymn to Wisdom (Job, chapter 28), in which our anonymous author returns to the theme of human ignorance:

But wisdom, where can it be found?  
 Where is the place of understanding?  
 Man knows not its abode,  
 Tis not found in the land of the living.  
 (Job 28:12–13)

Surely human beings have no access to divine action or wisdom. Wisdom is

concealed from the eyes of all living,  
 Even hid from the birds of the air . . .  
 God knows the way to it,  
 He is familiar with its place.  
 (Job 28:20; 23)

What, then, is Job's lesson? Ultimately, Job has learned that wisdom and understanding are not his to be had, and that the ways of Yahweh/God are a mystery. Job's final words are of repentance and recantation:

I talked of things I did not know,  
Wonders beyond my ken . . .  
I had heard of you by hearsay,  
But now my own eye has seen you  
So I recant and repent  
In dust and ashes.

(Job 42:3; 5–6)

Job has uttered the sentiment, echoed by contemporary skeptical theists, that human intellect is insufficient to understand the ways of God.

And yet, we have to reconcile these statements with the Epilogue, in which Yahweh/God tells his comforters that "you have not spoken truth of me, as did Job, my servant" (Job 42:7). What is it exactly that Job has said that is "right"? How could God have rebuked Job in earlier chapters for demonstrating ignorance, and yet commend him now for having spoken the truth? One way of understanding this rebuke is that unlike his friends who were too quick to offer a glib, superficial theodicy based on a faulty understanding on divine action, Job has come to appreciate his smallness, his insignificance, and the implications of this smallness with respect to his inability to understand. Perhaps, as Pope suggests, "God values the integrity of the impatient protester and abhors pious hypocrites who would heap accusations on a tormented soul to uphold their theological position" (Pope 1973, 353). What we have here is the contrast between false, ungrounded belief, and a newly found awareness of ignorance, which becomes a higher sort of knowledge. To echo Socrates, what I know is that I do not know: true knowledge lies in ignorance.

## Medieval Commentaries on Job

In keeping with the skeptical reading of the Book of Job, medieval philosophers often emphasized the providential aspect of the work. The medieval Jewish philosopher Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, 1135–1204), uses the Book of Job in his major philosophical work *The Guide for the Perplexed* as a perfect case study of how divine providence works in the real world. The story of Job is, in Maimonides' words "extraordinary and marvelous," a "parable intended to set forth the opinions of people concerning providence" (GP 3.22:486). The most marvelous and strange part of this story, according to Maimonides, is that Job is described at the beginning of story not as wise, but only as moral and righteous. Moral virtues, such as righteousness, turn out to be necessary but not sufficient for human perfection: intellectual virtue is required as well for human perfection, which leads to providential care. If Job had been wise, or had attained intellectual virtue, then "his situation would not have been obscure for him, as will become clear" (GP 3.22:487). The individual endowed with intellectual virtue will understand his/her position, and will not even be tempted by Satan to revile God when ones fortunes turn.

Maimonides interprets each of Job's "friends" as representative of one of the five theories of Providence described and rejected in the *Guide*: Job's own position (that evil attends to

both the righteous and wicked indiscriminately) is ostensibly identified with the Epicureans; that of Eliphaz reflects a simplistic reading of “the Law”; Bildad’s position is in keeping with that of the Islamic Mu‘tazilites; and Zophar, who emphasizes the immutable and absolute will of God, reflects the Islamic Asharite position. Maimonides pays particular attention to the opinions of the stranger Elihu, suggesting that it is Elihu who introduces an Aristotelian dimension into the Story of Job. The angelic intercession described by Elihu is akin to a moment of prophetic revelation, and is the very experience that Job achieves at the culmination of his ordeal. Unfortunately, Maimonides says very little about this experience, and we learn nothing about who this angel is, what exactly the angel does, and how Job reacts (see Rudavsky 2010).

Commentators both medieval and modern have disagreed over whether the angel is supposed to represent the Active Intellect, the human intellect, or possibly a higher intellect altogether. Most commentators do agree, however, that what Job learns from his ordeal is that ordinary human intellect is insufficient to understand the ways of God: Job is privy to the sublunar workings of the universe, but God reminds Job that our intellect cannot penetrate the super-lunar sphere (GP 3.23:496). Maimonides repeatedly reinforces the equivocal nature of divine action, the inability of humans to understand God’s motives, intention, or actions, and the inadequacy of any comparison between human and divine actions. (GP 3.23:496–497). Most important, it is the internal working of divine providence that is beyond human understanding. According to Maimonides, Job’s recantation reflects his newly acquired status that enables him to both understand and endure his situation with equanimity. What Job has learned is to transcend his suffering and not let it affect his inner being. This lesson reinforces the viewpoint of Elihu, who in Maimonides’ view presents the most sanguine view of providence.

A similar reading of Job is adduced by Thomas Aquinas, who sees the Book of Job as being primarily about the issue of providence, and only incidentally about the problem of evil *per se*. Aquinas sees Job’s friends as having a wrong view of the way in which providence operates. According to Aquinas, Job recognizes that “a good and loving God will nonetheless allow the worst sorts of adversities to befall a virtuous person also” (Stump 1996, 50). On Stump’s reading, Aquinas rejects a skeptical reading of Job, maintaining that if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the evil in question produces a benefit for the sufferer and one that God could not provide without the suffering.” Aquinas wants to remind us, via Job, that “if suffering is the chemotherapy for spiritual cancer, the patients whose regimen does not include any are the only ones for whom the prognosis is really bad” (Stump 1996, 57). In other words, Job suffers more than other people not because he is morally culpable, but because he is better than others; God can thus give Job more suffering to bear, and Job’s reward will be all the greater in the afterlife.

These commentaries reinforce the three distinct points elucidated in the Theophany: that God is supremely powerful and in control; that God, unlike Job who is clueless, is supremely wise; and finally, that the creation itself exhibits majesty, design and beauty, assigned a role in the overall scheme of things (see Morriston 1996). Anticipating the position of skeptical theism, Plantinga sums up the moral of the Book of Job as follows: “the reason for Job’s suffering is something entirely beyond his ken, so that the fact that he can’t see what sort of reason God might have for permitting his suffering doesn’t at all tend to show that God has no reason . . .” (Plantinga 1996, 75) On Plantinga’s reading of the work, God’s message to Job is simply that Job’s knowledge of God’s reasons is limited. Of course, let us not forget that what Job is supremely ignorant about is the very first chapter, but

whether a supremely benevolent deity would enter into such a bargain in the first place is an issue beyond the confines of this paper.

## Skeptical Theism and Apophatic Theology

We have seen that skeptical theism reflects assumptions both metaphysical and epistemological regarding the ability of humans to know or say anything about the Deity. At its most extreme, skeptical theism raises what Michael Sells has called the paradox of transcendence: "The transcendent must be beyond names, ineffable." In order to claim that the transcendent is beyond names, however, I must give it a name, "the transcendent." Any statement of ineffability, "X is beyond names," generates the aporia that the subject of the statement must be named (as X) in order for us to affirm that it is beyond names" (Sells 1994, 2). Sells delineates at least three responses to this aporia. The first response is silence, an acknowledgment that nothing can be said about the transcendent being. The second is to distinguish between ways in which the transcendent is beyond names, and ways in which it is not, as in the medieval distinction between God-as-he-is-in-himself, and God-as-he-is-in-creatures. The third is to accept the dilemma as a genuine aporia, as unresolvable, leading to a discourse of negative theology or apophasis (Sells 1994, 2–3). The paradox of transcendence becomes a leitmotif in the history of philosophy and reappears in the twentieth century in the guise of skeptical theism.

One of the earliest exponents of apophasis is Plotinus (d. 270 CE), whose *Enneads* present a philosophical and cosmological system of causality based upon a hierarchical series of hypostases, ranging from "the one" (*to hen*) to mind (*nous*) and soul (*psyche*). The ultimate goal of human existence is for the individual soul to turn away from the material world and reunite with the ultimate source of emanation, "the one." Plotinus tells us repeatedly in the *Enneads* that "the one" is "beyond being" or "the beyond being" (*epekeina ontos*); the very act of naming delimits this being "beyond being." In Plotinus's words, "The beyond-being' does not refer to a some-thing since it does not posit any-thing, nor does it 'speak its name.'" (Enneads 5.5.6 11) Nor can the one be grasped in human understanding: "It is certainly nothing of the things of which it is the origin, being such, as it were, that nothing can be attributed to it, neither being, nor beings, nor life. It is beyond those" (Enneads 6.8 20).

The influence of Plotinus can be felt in a number of early Christian thinkers who emphasize the nothingness of God in the context of apophatic discourse. John Scotus Eriugena (810–877) composed a work entitled *Periphyseon* (*On the Divine Nature*) in which, drawing upon the work of pseudo-Dionysius, he emphasizes apophatic discourse in his conceptualization of God. Eriugena's work provides an alternative cosmology to that of Aristotle, one that emphasizes the mystical ideas of divine darkness and the ultimate unification of everything with God. Eriugena begins with a division of nature into two categories: things that are (that can be grasped by the human mind) and things that are not (that transcend human understanding). That which transcends the mind necessarily transcends being as well, thus establishing an isomorphism between ontology and epistemology. Adopting an emanationist scheme, the ontological movement of things from their primordial unity into the world, and back to their source, is reflected in reason itself. The divine nature itself is simple, beyond being, time, and space (although even using the term "beyond" is problematic in the context of apophatic discourse). God is described as the

ineffable and incomprehensible and inaccessible brilliance of the Divine Goodness which is unknown to all intellects whether human or angelic – for it is superessential and supernatural – which while it is contemplated in itself neither is nor was nor shall be, for it is understood to be in none of the things that exist because it surpasses all things, but . . . it alone is found to be in all things. . . . Hence the inaccessible brilliance of the celestial powers is often called by theology darkness. (*Periphyseon* 680D–681B)

God lies beyond all the Aristotelian categories, and thus, like Plotinus, Eriugena argues that God is beyond both being and language: “strictly speaking, the ineffable nature can be signified by no verb, by no noun, and by no other audible sound, by no signified thing.” (*Periphyseon* 460C) Because God has no essence, there is no “what” which God is, and so even God does not know what He is, since if God knows *what* He is, he is defining himself: “since, being beyond nature, it escapes all comprehension by itself, how much more (will it elude) any defined or definable intellect?” (*Periphyseon* 620D). If not even God can have self-knowledge, it should certainly come as no surprise that finite minds cannot know what God is.

The most radical medieval exponent of apophysis in the context of Aristotelianism is presented by Maimonides, who, reflecting both Plotinus and Eriugena, argues in *The Guide of the Perplexed* that we must be careful not to attribute to God any predicates that imply or impute to God anthropomorphic or corporeal features. He analyzes both positive attributes and relational terms, arguing that neither is appropriate to predicate of God. In fact, it turns out that we can say very little, if anything, positive *or* negative, about God: *all* attempts to describe God fall short.

Maimonides develops in Part I, chapters 51–60 of the *Guide* an elaborate theory of divine predication, akin to apophatic theology, the purpose of which is to demonstrate why linguistic utterances are inadequate to say anything about God. In chapter 56, Maimonides develops what has become a controversial theory of homonymous or equivocal predication. Arguing that there can be no likeness between God and humans, so does Maimonides claim that there can be no similarity or likeness between the predicates ascribed to humans and to God. Maimonides adapts Aristotle’s notion of equivocal predication according to which a term can be predicated of two things between which there is no likeness at all. I can use the term “bat,” for example, to describe both a wooden object used to hit balls, as well as small flying creatures that live under the Congress Street Bridge in Austin. Maimonides argues that because there is nothing in common between God and humans, terms predicated of God must be understood as equivocal terms. These equivocal predicates, such as God’s power, essence, will, or knowledge, have nothing but the linguistic utterance in common (GP 1:56:131). God is totally other in all respects, and so terms describing God cannot be applied either univocally or amphibolously.

In *Guide* 1.58–1.60, Maimonides presents the radical implications of his theory, arguing that ultimately, negative predication alone brings the human mind closer to an understanding of God: “Know that the description of God, may he be cherished and exalted, by means of negations is the correct description” (GP 1.58:134). This piece of Maimonides’ theory of divine predication represents the logical culmination of his theory of language, and finds contemporary analogue in skeptical theism. Maimonides explicitly states that describing God by means of affirmations, by means of positive ascriptions, yields the paradoxical result of receding in knowledge from God. Negations, on the other hand, are applied to things that by nature cannot have the predicate in question. Take, for example, the statement

“the wall is blind.” Since walls are not the sorts of things that are able to see or fail to see, it makes no sense to attribute either seeing or not seeing to a wall. Similarly, God is not the sort of entity of which anything is or fails to be, and so we can only attribute negations of God. Attributes predicated of God signify “the negation of the privation of the attribute in question” (GP 1.58:136). When we say of God that “God is not temporal,” what we mean is that God is not the sort of thing to which temporality either applies or fails to apply. To apply *either* temporality *or* nontemporality to God is to be guilty of a category error. A better way of making this point would be to say “God is not untemporal,” emphasizing the uniqueness of God. Maimonides is explicit on this point: whenever a person affirms of God positive attributes, said person recedes from God’s true reality. Ultimately, silence is the only appropriate linguistic response to divine predication: “silence with regard to You is praise” (GP 1.59:139). Once we recognize with Maimonides that God inhabits a unique class of one, we realize that human language simply cannot talk about this unique ontological entity, and so to paraphrase Wittgenstein, one must remain silent.

Compare Maimonides’ doctrine to the theory of analogy developed by the thirteenth-century scholastic Thomas Aquinas, according to whom predicates can be ascribed relationally (or analogically) to humans and to God. Some commentators have understood Aquinas as arguing that we have no knowledge of God at all, drawing upon his statements to the effect that God is incomprehensible; it is true that Aquinas repeatedly makes the point, for example, that when it comes to God, we cannot know what He is, only that He is. He offers arguments in many of his works to support the claim that God is not in any genus, and that naming God falls short. In other words, we cannot develop a “science” of God in the way that we can develop a science of things whose essence we can ascertain (Davies 2006, 79; see ST, question 12). By calling God a mystery, Aquinas means that God is not an item in the world like other items; God is not an instance of a kind, nor is God even the one and only instance of a kind; and whatever God’s nature is cannot be distinguished from God itself (See Davies 2006, 27).

What this amounts to is that while we can make true statements about God of the form “God is good” or “God exists,” we are seriously in the dark when it comes to understanding what it is for God to *be* perfect, or to *be* good. One implication of this reading is that according to Aquinas, God is not a moral agent in the same way that we are moral agents, and so there can be no explanation of evil on the part of God in the way that we might explain human action. In fact, Aquinas actually denies that God is rational, or has reasons, in the way that humans are rational, and so we cannot explain or understand God’s actions on a human model (Davies 2006, 229).

Unlike Maimonides, however, Aquinas does think that we can truly affirm certain things of God without equivocation, and that we can know that what we say when doing so is true. Although he cites Pseudo-Dionysius regularly, whose emphasis upon the transcendence and unknowability of God is extreme, Aquinas does not move in the direction of Pseudo-Dionysius’s apophatic theology.<sup>1</sup> Rather, Aquinas’s noted doctrine of analogy is an attempt to drive a middle ground between negative theology on the one hand and total univocity on the other. In contradistinction to Maimonides, Aquinas holds that every act

1 For a study of the importance of Pseudo-Dionysius to Aquinas, see Fran O’Rourke (1992). *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden/New York: Brill).



of negation depends upon the prior grasp of an affirmation. He thus assumes that there is a hierarchy of meaningful predications about God, and that our language, when applied to God, can be meaningful (Jordan 1983, 168; see ST, question 14). Thus for example, Aquinas claims that the term “good” when ascribed to God is proportionally greater than when ascribed to humans. According to Aquinas, while the term “good” does not mean exactly the same thing in both cases, we can nevertheless draw an analogy between the goodness of God and the goodness of humans. As a result, unlike thinkers in the apophatic tradition, Aquinas will maintain that human beings can, in fact, come to understand and know God, albeit in an attenuated sense (ST, question 12).

## Cartesian Skepticism

Let us now turn to Descartes’ discussion of evil, which shares a striking similarity to contemporary accounts of skeptical theism. Although Descartes does not broach the problem of theodicy as such, the issue is embedded in his epistemological concern with error. I shall argue that just as the skeptical theist appeals to mystery and our inability to know and understand God’s intentions, so too does Descartes stress the inability of a finite intellect to penetrate the mysterious intentions and actions of an infinite being.

Cartesian scholars have long pointed out the similarity between Descartes’ theory of error and the Christian idea of sin (Calvert 1972; Janowski 2000; Gaul 2004). Descartes himself supports this comparison when, in his synopsis to the *Meditations*, he introduces (and ostensibly dismisses) the notion of sin: “I do not deal at all with sin, that is, the error which is committed in pursuing good and evil, but only with the error that occurs in distinguishing truth from falsehood. And there is no discussion of matters pertaining to faith or the conduct of life, but simply of speculative truths which are known solely by means of the natural light” (*Meditations*, 75; AT IV 7:15). While Descartes is careful to dissociate himself from the theological ramifications resulting from issues of theodicy, recent scholars have emphasized the extent to which Descartes’ epistemological arguments in fact draw upon and mirror traditional theological positions. Janowski goes so far as to argue that these epistemological considerations are intelligible only within a religious framework, thus translating Descartes’ epistemological notions, such as truth and falsity, into moral categories, such as good and evil, or into religious categories, such as sin (Janowski 2000). While we cannot in this short study encompass the entirety of Descartes’ enterprise, let us focus on three Cartesian themes: the possibility of a deceiving deity, Descartes’ theory of error, and the doctrine of the eternal truths. Each of these themes pertains directly, as we shall see, to the underlying skeptical theism implicit in Descartes’ work.

In the well-known first meditation, in his attempt to erect an epistemological foundation that is indubitable, Descartes worries that God might be thoroughly deceiving him. He then cites God’s “reputation for goodness” in order to dismiss this worry. But, as Maitzen rightly notes, if deception is ever good, then presumably even a good God could deceive us, and “if we’re as clueless about God’s true purposes as skeptical theism says we may be, then for all we know radical deception on God’s part represents the height of goodness” (Maitzen 2009, 96–97). Thomas Hobbes, in the *Third Set of Objections to the Meditations*, had similarly wondered whether deception could be consistent with divine benevolence, arguing that all one would need to show is that Descartes’ God could sometimes directly deceive us for our own good. Descartes realizes that he must make a case for

supposing that no sort of deception can be attributed to God. It is true that we make mistakes, he argues, but their cause is due to us and not to God. Ruling out a deceptive deity is essential, therefore, to his epistemological enterprise.

In the third meditation, Descartes rules out a deceptive God, writing that God “cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect” (Third Meditation, 98; AT IV 7:52). But in setting the groundwork to his claim, we see already intimations of theological skepticism. Descartes is careful to point out that I cannot really understand God. Coming to know God does not happen only by negating the finite. In fact, not surprisingly, Descartes claims that a finite intellect cannot grasp God’s nature: “It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being by myself” (Third Meditation, 94; AT IV 7:46). But if that is the case, do we have sufficient reason for thinking that God has no morally sufficient reasons for committing deception? Could not a reasonable case be made that God has plausible reasons, beyond our comprehension, for permitting evil/sin/deception to occur? Descartes must short-circuit this suggestion.

Descartes thus turns in the Fourth Meditation to whether the existence of error is consistent with the existence of an all-powerful, perfect nondeceiving Deity. We have noted earlier Descartes’ claim that he is concerned not with moral error, but rather with epistemological error (that which pertains to speculative truth). His discussion in this fourth meditation, however, is applicable to the problem of error/evil more globally considered, providing what one commentator has called “a theodicy for error.”<sup>2</sup> The tension here is in the supposition of an omniperfect creator who produces a world with evil. Descartes’ problem is straightforward: If God has provided me with cognitive faculties that presumably are not error-prone, then why do I commit so many errors? Descartes’ four possible solutions to this problem parallel standard theodical accounts found in Augustine and other medieval philosophers. His extended argument in the Fourth Meditation, can be seen as an attempt to dress these theodical accounts in epistemological garb as follows. I provide here a summary of the four subarguments contained in his solution to epistemological error.

### *Argument from privation*

Considering the possibility of God’s deceiving me, Descartes argues that this is impossible, since God is not the sort of being who would give me “the kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly” (Fourth Meditation, 99; AT IV 7:53) the cause of error lies not in God, but in a defect that lies in me: Insofar as “I participate in nothingness or non-being . . . it is no wonder that I make mistakes,” (Fourth Meditation, 11; AT IV 7:54) thus concluding that error is not something that depends on God, but merely a privation.

2 See Newman (1999, 560). See also Calvert’s claim that the Fourth Meditation “should be regarded as an important and original contribution to the history of the problem of evil.” (Calvert 1972, 117). Latzer has argued that the Fourth Meditation has a “general significance for the project of theodicy,” and that it offers “a solution to the problem of evil as complete, in its own succinct way, as Leibniz’s is on a grander scale” (Latzer 2001, 210).

### *Argument from skeptical knowledge*

But why did God endow me with a faculty that can lead to error; surely God could have created me with a nature such that I never made mistakes? Descartes reminds us that we cannot understand God's reasons for action: "there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the <impenetrable> purposes of God" (Fourth Meditation, 11). Descartes thus claims that we must look at the larger picture, and understand ourselves in the context of that larger picture.

### *Free will argument*

In this argument Descartes comes closest to classical free will defenses of the existence of evil. Just as the medievals argued that evil and sin are due to the free choices of humans, so too does Descartes claim that error results from the will's overstepping its bounds. Because the scope of will is wider than that of intellect, when I extend the use of the will "to matters which I do not understand," error results: "since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin" (Fourth Meditation, 102; AT IV 7:58).

### *Aesthetic argument*

But why, Descartes asks, could not God have created me as a creature that does not overstep the bounds of will? Descartes responds with an echo of the classic aesthetic argument, according to which there may be more perfection in the universe as a whole because "some of its parts are not immune to error, while others are immune" (Fourth Meditation, 104; AT IV 7:61). My best option is to do my best to avoid error.

While the first and third arguments reiterate common theodical claims found in medieval texts, both the second and fourth arguments pertain directly to our skeptical concerns. The second argument reiterates the now common theme that finite intellects are not in a position to fully understand an infinite being. The fourth argument anticipates Mackie's famous challenge to the free will defense, namely that presumably it would have been logically possible for God to have created beings who were free, and yet who did not sin (Mackie 1955). Descartes even provides a couple of examples to show what God might have done instead, but responds to these examples by providing an aesthetic solution: God could have made free beings who do not actually err, but God would only have availed himself of this possibility in a world inhabited by a single individual. But as Calvert has pointed out, if Descartes' suggestions are heeded universally, "this would entail the possibility of there being a world in which no actual mistakes were ever made" (Calvert 1972, 125), thus undermining the aesthetic solution. Descartes' solution once again is to fall back upon the unknowability of God's motives in creating the world that He did create.

The tension between human will and intellect mirrors a similar tension in God's will and intellect. Descartes has told us that human will most resembles divine will. But as many commentators have noted, Descartes' notion of divine will is quite radical indeed, and is rooted in his doctrine of eternal truths. We have seen that the doctrine of human freedom in the fourth meditation can be boiled down to the claim that indifference of the will is the cause of deception and sin. But when turning to a discussion of God's predicates,

Descartes blurs the distinction between God's intellect and will, establishing a rough isomorphism between them. This isomorphism is evidenced in his doctrine of eternal truths, which consists of three statements: that God created mathematical truths by an act of His free will; that these truths are not attached to God's essence; and that in God, there is no distinction between will and intellect (Janowski 2000, 79). These statements occur primarily in various letters to his interlocutors.

In his letter to Mersenne on April 15, 1630, Descartes explains his doctrine of eternal truths as follows:

The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely . . . it is God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom. . . . The greatness of God . . . is something which we cannot grasp even though we know it. But the very fact that we judge it beyond our grasp makes us esteem it the more greatly." (Correspondence, 22; AT 145)

Descartes goes on to claim that it would be rash "to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power" (Correspondence, 22). The dependence of the eternal truths, or laws of nature, upon God's will, is reiterated in subsequent conversation with Mersenne. Descartes identifies divine will and intellect, saying that "in God willing and knowing are a single thing" (Correspondence, 24; AT 149), and that God is not only the creator of the existence of things, but He is also the creator of their essences.

Descartes is thus introducing a new conception of God according to which God is not bound by any norms of rationality and morality as we know them. Consequently, His nature is completely unintelligible to the human mind" (see Janowski 2000, 41). One clear implication of this view is that God is not and cannot be limited by anything; God must be indifferent to any truths or norms. But how is this position reconciled with Descartes' theodicy? Descartes' contemporaries were shocked by this conception of God, arguing that it threatened not only the laws of mathematics, but the principles of morality as well. So, too, do modern writers find this aspect of Descartes' theory problematic. Latzer argues that what renders the theodicy of the Fourth Meditation ineffectual is the doctrine of God's freedom: "[I]f God is not bound by the logically possible, if there are literally no limits to what his omnipotent power can accomplish, then no possible theodicy will be effective" (Latzer 2001, 46–47). For if God can create square circles, or make it be the case that  $2 + 2 = 5$ , then surely God could have achieved the good of the whole without the not-so-perfect parts, or bring about a world without any error or evil. That he did not do so, Latzer argues, "casts doubts on God's moral character" (Latzer 2001, 47). All Descartes can do is appeal to the "mystery of god": how can a finite mind understand an infinite mind? If Descartes's "theodicy" and his notion that God can create the eternal truths are both true, then God's ways are more mysterious than previously thought, leading once again to skeptical theism.

## Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed skeptical approaches to God and theodicy prior to the twentieth-century discussions. The lessons of Job, apophatic theology, Cartesian doubt, and the emphasis upon divine omnipotence, these all serve as predecessors to the view that human comprehension of the deity is limited. Because humans cannot understand the ways,

motives, or essence of God, we cannot even begin to understand why God permits innocents to suffer, or error and sin to exist. But skeptical theism runs the risk of extending to moral knowledge as well (see Chapter 30). Wielenberg has argued that “skeptical theism is at odds with any religious tradition according to which there are certain claims that we can know to be true solely in virtue of the fact that God has told us that they are true” (Wielenberg 2010, 509). Thus, skeptical theism about God’s reasons for evil carries implications with respect to skepticism about divine assertions in general, and moral assertions in particular. How can we know whether any divine claims are true? If we are unable to distinguish lying from true divine claims, what sense can we attribute to the sacrifice of Isaac, a situation in which God intentionally creates in Abraham’s mind the belief that Abraham is going to have to sacrifice Isaac, a belief that ultimately turns out to be false? Wielenberg concludes that it is simply not reasonable for skeptical theists to take God at His word. If the theory of divine deception is sound, then skeptical theism implies that, for all we know, God’s word constitutes “not divine revelation but rather a justified, divine lie” (Wielenberg 2010, 520). And if this is the case, then what sense can we make of divine commands, or of the grounding of moral claims in God’s “word”? The implications of skeptical theism extend into the very sphere of morality.

Perhaps in anticipation of the problems attending to grounding notions of good and evil in a transcendent being, Maimonides (as does Spinoza several centuries later) argues that good and evil, as opposed to true and false, are not intellectual concepts, but rather are notions that arise as a result of the act of the imagination. Good and evil reflect pragmatic conditions and do not indicate anything positive in reality. As Harvey puts it, “according to the Maimonidean-Spinozistic definitions of ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ [. . .] the question of what things are to be considered good or evil is at bottom a subjective one, that is, it is relative to our own intents, targets, and *exemplaria*” (Harvey 1981). This is not to say that Maimonides, or Spinoza, for that matter, is a moral relativist; on the contrary, both present a clear articulation of what they take to be the end of human endeavor. But from a meta-ethical perspective, the terms good and evil have no definitive meaning. The relativism of moral terms can be contrasted with the propositions of mathematics and physics, which we can know through the science of demonstration. Maimonides argues that good and evil, as opposed to true and false, are not intellectual concepts, but rather are notions that arise as a result of the act of the imagination. More specifically, the terms “fine” (*tov*) and “bad” (*ra*) signify generally accepted opinions, things “generally accepted as known,” and are not rooted in reality itself (see GP). In saying this, Maimonides is describing the use of the word in ordinary language, and not anything more objective than that. He argues that theoretically (although such a person does not exist in fact), an individual ruled entirely by intellect, and not at all by his affections, would not entertain the notions of good and evil; such terms would be either meaningless or redundant. By emphasizing the unknowability of God, all the problems attendant upon a divine command morality reappear. And so while the skeptical theist, broadly conceived, may have provided a provisional response to the problem of theodicy, many other problems and issues arise as a result.

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# Peter van Inwagen's Defense

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Here is a recipe for a simple and powerful argument against the existence of an omnipotent and morally perfect god. Let  $x$  be any actual, contingent instance of suffering that does not contribute to any known outweighing good:

- (P1):  $x$  occurred and was a contingent and pointless evil – it did not, in fact, contribute to any outweighing good.
- (P2): If  $x$  occurred and was a contingent and pointless evil, then there is at least one possible world,  $w$ , where  $x$  does not occur and  $w$  is better than the actual world. That is, there is a possible world that realizes all of the goods of this world without the unnecessary suffering caused by  $x$ .
- (P3): An omnipotent, morally perfect creator did not create a world as good as  $w$ .<sup>1</sup>
- (P4): If an omnipotent, morally perfect creator exists and there is a world  $w$  without the contingent and pointless evil, the omnipotent, morally perfect creator would create a world at least as good as  $w$ .
- (C): No omnipotent and morally perfect creator exists.

With the recipe in hand, it is an easy (if perverse) exercise to find candidates for  $x$ . The Holocaust? The excruciating death of an isolated fawn in a forest fire? The rape and mutilation of a woman? Peter van Inwagen dubs arguments that follow roughly this schema “local arguments from evil,” because they depend crucially on identifying a particular instance of a pointless evil. Local arguments like the one surveyed are not particularly new; one lurks, for example, in the wings of Ivan Karamazov’s famous rejection of theism in Book V of *The Brothers Karamazov*. But in the past few decades, the local argument has enjoyed a strong revival of philosophical interest. Nowadays, it is more often posed in probabilistic terms, as in Rowe (1979)’s version – if probably  $x$  is a pointless evil, then probably an

<sup>1</sup> Note that here I understand omniscience to be one aspect of God’s omnipotence.

omnipotent, morally perfect creator does not exist. In either the simple or probabilistic formulations, local arguments pose a bedeviling challenge for theists. The recipe's form is valid. So we must either reject one of the premises or accept the atheistic conclusion. And the premises each seem quite defensible. The world provides a panoply of seemingly pointless horrors to run the first premise. (P2) follows from a natural understanding of contingency and pointlessness. Only a strange sort of modal realist – someone who thought God created many possible worlds – would reject (P3).<sup>2</sup> And the final premise seems to follow from a plausible version of the principle of beneficence: all else equal, moral agents will try to bring about the best overall state of affairs that they can. God – if he exists – could bring about a world that lacked the contingent pointless evil in question, and presumably he could do this without making any comparable sacrifice. So if there were a God, he would have chosen to create a world better than one with contingent pointless evil.<sup>3</sup> Together, the premises constitute one of the most challenging formulations of the problem of evil.

What should the theist do? Some philosophers like Wykstra (1984), Alston (1991), Howard-Snyder (1996), and Bergmann (2001) focus their attention on arguing that (P1) is unjustified. But rather than trying to explain the outweighing good for every candidate pointless evil (a monumental task!), their strategy is to convince us that we are not justified in taking ourselves to be reliable judges of what is all-things-considered good or bad (see Chapter 29). They insist that, *for all we know*, there is an outweighing good for every candidate for *x* and so, for all we know, there are no actual pointless evils. This strategy defuses the local argument. But it leaves the theist in an awkward position of claiming that, for all he knows, the Holocaust, the fawn, the rape and murder, and so on are justified by some outweighing good. Do we not know enough of how our moral universe works to confidently declare that these evils are morally unjustified? Some theists – myself included – find ourselves unsatisfied toeing the line that, for all we know, there are absolutely no pointless evils. Which raises a question: *must* theists hope there is a particular divine justification for each of the evils in our world?

Van Inwagen thinks not. He offers an innovative defense to the local argument that allows the theist to maintain that there are some pointless evils without falling into contradiction. His defense rests crucially on counterexamples to the moral principle that motivates (P4). In this chapter, I will consider van Inwagen's defense to the local argument from evil, situating his defense in the context of his thinking about problems of evil more generally. Here is how I will proceed. In the first section, I will outline van Inwagen's answer to the different, global argument from evil and his theory of what precisely a defense against a problem of evil must accomplish. In the second section, I will unpack van Inwagen's distinctive response to the local argument from evil. In brief, van Inwagen contends that God faced a kind of practical sorites problem in deciding which world to create, and for this reason, he could not eliminate every pointless evil. In the third section, I will consider three objections to van Inwagen's practical sorites approach to the local argument from evil, and I will suggest replies. Finally, in the fourth section, I will consider two possible extensions

<sup>2</sup> But see Hud Hudson's contribution to this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Note that (P4) does not assume that if an omnipotent, morally perfect creator exists, he will choose to create the best possible world. There may be no absolutely best possible world. The premise merely assumes that a morally perfect, omnipotent being would choose to create a world without pointless instances of suffering. See Rowe (2002) for discussion of the "no best world" arguments, which also raise problems for the principle of beneficence.

of van Inwagen's practical sorites model – it may give nonuniversalist theists a defense against the problem of Hell, and it may provide a way of reconciling the doctrine of the Fall with gradual human evolution. Because of limits of space and considerations of focus, I will not address two other noteworthy features of van Inwagen's defense: his theory of pre-Lapsarian animal suffering and his open theism. Both are philosophically important and controversial. But they are somewhat subsidiary to these other issues, and I can only recommend them to the reader for further research.

## Van Inwagen and Skeptical Theism

Van Inwagen's thinking on the problem of evil develops over the course of several key papers, beginning with "The Magnitude, Duration and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy" published in 1988. The mature and comprehensive statement of his views comes in the 2003 Gifford Lectures and corresponding book: *The Problem of Evil*. Van Inwagen's work in this period fits closely with two trends in analytic philosophy of religion since the early 1970s, namely a renewed interest in free will defenses and the rise of different forms of skeptical theism. To understand van Inwagen's approach to the problem of evil, we must appreciate how he fits with these two trends.

Van Inwagen takes care to distinguish local arguments from evil (like the one surveyed in the introduction) from what he calls "the global argument from evil." The global argument runs as follows:

- (1) We find a vast amount of truly horrendous evil in the world.
- (2) If there were a God, we should not find vast amounts of truly horrendous evil in the world.
- (C) So, there is no God.

Most theists want to resist the second premise, and they can do this in one of two ways. The first strategy is to explain why the premise is false. The second strategy is to argue that given our limited evidence, we cannot know that the premise is true. Following Plantinga (1974), understand a *defense* as any possible proposition *r*, which if added to the proposition that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good entails that God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing it. *Theodicians* put forward a defense that they think is justified by their evidence. They attempt to explain evil in light of their religious beliefs. In contrast, *skeptical theists* apply a weaker standard – they put forward candidates for *r* that they insist cannot be ruled out by the available evidence (see Chapter 29). They do not further insist that their story is true or justified.<sup>4</sup> This weaker standard is enough for *r* to be a counterexample to a given argument from evil. From Plantinga onward, a growing number of philosophers of religion have pursued skeptical strategies, and van Inwagen has been a leader in this movement.

An example makes the distinction between theodicies and mere defenses more clear. Suppose an atheist presses the global argument from evil. A theodist might respond by

4 It is important to note that there is another, related sense of *skeptical theism* that does not apply to van Inwagen's theory. Some use the term as a label for theists like Wykstra, Alston, Howard-Snyder, and Bergmann who are skeptical about the truth of (P1) of the local argument from evil.

insisting that God wanted to create a world with free creatures and orderly laws of nature. Such a plan required God to create a chancy world, risking vast amounts of evil. Some evils arise directly from the abuse of his creatures' free wills. Other evils arise from natural disasters and his creatures' inability to cope with them. The theodicitist says that, in fact, that was the divine plan. And though God could prevent any particular evil from occurring, eliminating most or all of the evil would prevent his creatures from exercising freedom, prevent them from having awareness of their morally distorted state, prevent them from participating in God's plan of redemption, and result in a massively disorderly world. Given that this story is justified, our theodicitist concludes that the second premise of the global argument from evil is false. This is a full-blown free will theodicy (see Chapter 14).

The skeptical theist may offer a similar story to rebut the global argument from evil. But he will demure in insisting that *his* story is true or justified. Rather, he will say that, *for all any of us know*, this story about God's plan of creation and redemption is true. We are in no position to rule it out. So we should suspend judgment on the second premise of the global argument from evil. Whereas the theodicitist claims to grasp some of God's reasons for allowing evil, the skeptical theist does not. Van Inwagen presses exactly this kind of defense in response to the global problem of evil. He calls it the "expanded free will defense," and he insists that, for all any of us know, it is true.

What should we make of the strategy? Ideally, theists would have full-blown theodicies on hand to answer arguments from evil. But at some point, our knowledge of God and his reasons runs out, and we must turn to mere defenses. If we no longer demand a high level of justification for the defense, how do we judge whether a particular defense is good or bad? Setting the appropriate burden has been a vexed issue. Presumably, the defense should not be trivial – *r* should not just be the proposition that God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing it. The defense should gesture at the content of a possible divine reason for allowing evil. And it needs to be the kind of story that for all we know is true. But it is not obvious how to interpret the "for all we know" standard. Van Inwagen's views about what a successful defense must accomplish evolve over the course of his writing.

In earlier work, like van Inwagen (1998b), he hews to the notion of a defense inaugurated by Plantinga. He insists that a successful skeptical theist defense to the global argument from evil must meet two criteria. First, the actual amount of suffering must be highly probable given the conjunction of theism and the defense. Second, we must not be in a position to tell how probable the defense is given theism. For many candidate defenses, van Inwagen does not think we are in a position to judge their probability given theism. This is because van Inwagen endorses a much more general modal skepticism; he insists that while we can judge the probability of certain propositions of ordinary life reliably (i.e., the probability that a light will turn on when the switch is flipped), we are not in a position to judge the probability of more esoteric philosophical propositions like those of the expanded free will defense. (See van Inwagen 1979; 1998a for more detailed exposition of his modal skepticism)

In *The Problem of Evil*, van Inwagen frames the theist's burden somewhat differently, though his later view is compatible with the earlier probabilistic approach. In the book, van Inwagen thinks that we should imagine the theist and atheist as participants in a forensic debate, offering and rebutting arguments on the proposition that God exists. He then defines a burden for philosophical success in such a debate:

An argument for  $p$  is a success just in case it can be used under ideal circumstances, to convert an audience of ideal agnostics (agnostics with respect to  $p$ ) to belief in  $p$  – in the presence of an ideal opponent of belief in  $p$ . (van Inwagen 2006, 47)

A defense is successful with respect to a given argument from evil if and only if introducing the defense prevents the ideal agnostics from believing the conclusion of the argument. In applying this standard, it matters a great deal how we characterize the ideal agnostics. Van Inwagen proposes that they are an audience of very intelligent people from our time and culture. They possess a high degree of philosophical ability and intellectual honesty. Before the debate begins, they have no opinion on the question of whether God exists. They are willing to spend as much time as necessary considering the arguments offered by the ideal debaters. And they at least partly share van Inwagen's modal skepticism. Finally – though he is not as explicit about it – it is also clear that he imagines the ideal agnostics as scientifically informed and inclined to believe in laws of nature and modern evolutionary biology.<sup>5</sup>

The “ideal debate” apparatus has been a controversial part of van Inwagen's later approach to the problem of evil. For example, Swinburne (2007) objects that the ability to persuade an audience who has suspended judgment on many philosophically important matters should not count for or against a given philosophical argument, since it is hard to see that such an audience is “rational” in a contentful sense of the term. Further, there are particular aspects of van Inwagen's expanded free will defense that we may worry ideal agnostics would *not* suspend judgment about. For example, as part of his expanded free will defense, van Inwagen contends that for all we know, God miraculously raised a small breeding population of our earliest ancestors to rationality within a single generation, and this breeding population was responsible for a historical Fall – a first moment of mankind turning against God. (See van Inwagen 2006, 85–86.) This sudden Fall assumption reconciles two other components of the expanded free will defense. First, his defense contends that the Fall was a result of the misuse of man's rationality and freedom. Second, his defense includes a nonuniversalist assumption – if rebellious mankind does not freely cooperate with God's plan of redemption, they face eternal separation from God in the afterlife. If rationality and freedom emerged only very gradually, then there would be populations of our early human ancestors such that it is indeterminate whether they were rational and free and so indeterminate whether they could rebel or cooperate with salvation. But the afterlife options are presumably determinate; hence the apparent need for a sudden, determinate Fall.

Would ideal agnostics go along with the sudden Fall component of the free will defense? The success of van Inwagen's particular expanded free will defense depends crucially on how the ideal agnostics view evolutionary psychology. In particular, they must suspend judgment on whether humans developed the capacity for rationality and freedom rapidly and miraculously or whether it took many generations. To some, this may seem like an esoteric philosophical proposition meriting skepticism. But I suspect other readers will think this free will defense is likely to be ruled out by whatever mature theory of human evolution we ultimately settle on. In the fourth section, I will return to the question of what van Inwagen and his supporters ought to say about the Fall. I think he can make the

5 This comes out most clearly in Lecture 7 of *The Problem of Evil*.

expanded free will defense immune to evolutionary objections by expanding his response to the local argument from evil. It is this topic to which we now turn.

## Pointless Evils and Practical Sorites Problems

Van Inwagen's response to the global argument from evil fits squarely with the popular skeptical theist trend in recent philosophy of religion. But when we turn to the local argument from evil, van Inwagen departs from the norm in a significant way. The most common strategy for addressing the local argument from evil focuses on the first premise: the assumption that there are identifiable, contingent, pointless evils. While many philosophers advance further skeptical hypotheses for explaining particular pointless evils, van Inwagen instead offers an explanation for why an all-powerful and loving God may nevertheless allow some contingent pointless evils. Indeed, a curious feature of van Inwagen's approach is he is unwilling to be skeptical about pointless evils when he is skeptical about so much else.

In his papers and book, van Inwagen is primarily concerned with what he calls "horrors"—pointless evils of a significant magnitude. Recall that it is part of van Inwagen's expanded free will defense that God had to permit some amount of evil in the world in order to implement his plan of creation and redemption. Does the expanded free will defense entail that the actual amount of evil was determinately required for realizing God's plans? According to van Inwagen, we have no reason to think it does. And if the amount of evil required by the expanded free will defense is indeterminate, then God is susceptible to a kind of practical sorites problem. For this reason, he may be required to allow pointless evils. In this section, I will unpack the practical sorites problem and show how it bears on the local argument from evil.

Before considering van Inwagen's argument, it will be helpful to have a theory of practical sorites problems. This theory is more general than any that van Inwagen formulates, but it will give us a common framework for understanding his cases. Let us define a *policy* as any rule of the form "If X, then bring about Y. Otherwise bring about Z." Call X the policy's *condition* and Y and Z its *mandates*. An example of a policy might be "If Joe goes to college, buy him a car. Otherwise do not." Practical sorites problems arise whenever an agent tries to apply a policy in a situation that meets the following criteria: (1) the policy's condition is susceptible of indeterminacy (including higher-order indeterminacy), (2) the policy is being applied in a context where its indeterminate cases exist, and (3) the policy only has determinate mandates.<sup>6</sup> When trying to make a decision in such a situation, agents will inevitably be forced to arbitrarily choose among the mandates. To get a feel for how these problems come about, consider an example:

### *The Hoosier Hair Sorites*

Suppose the state of Indiana decides to have a "Barely Not Bald" contest and to give a prize to the man with the least amount of hair on his head who is not bald. There is exactly one award and we are intent on giving it out. We first disqualify anyone with a

6 Or at least mandates that are more determinate than the condition.

very abnormal hair distribution – for example, we would not let a man with a single long hair tightly wrapped around his head compete. We then line up every man in the state of Indiana from hairiest to baldest. On the leftmost end of the line, we have a very hairy man. On the rightmost end, we have a man with a shiny pate. In between, there is a line of men from left to right who gradually have less and less hair. The policy we follow is this: *If someone is not bald and there is no not bald man with fewer hairs on his head, then give him the award. Otherwise, check the next man to the right.* Now suppose we work our way down the series from left to right, applying the policy to each man. Presumably the rightmost man and his neighbors should not get the award. As we move further down the series, at some point, we will need to give out the award. But which particular man deserves the award? For any man in the middle of the series, it seems arbitrary to say that he is not bald while his neighbor to the right is. You can imagine the first man to be classified as bald protesting: “But why don’t you pick me for the award – how could one or two hairs make a difference!”

Our policy for the Barely Not Bald contest meets the three conditions. The cutoff for baldness and its converse is susceptible of indeterminacy: while some people are definitely bald and some people are definitely not, many others are in the hair penumbra. Further, the policy is being applied in a context where indeterminate cases exist. And finally, there are only two determinate mandates—give the award or not. So it seems it is just not possible to give the award without making an arbitrary distinction. For any reasonable candidate for Barely Not Bald, there will be men to his right and left that seem equally deserving.

In the grand scheme of things, baldness sorites problems are insignificant. The practically minded can save headaches and tax dollars by just refusing to hold contests like Barely Not Bald. But van Inwagen thinks there are morally significant practical sorites problems that are harder to avoid, and these should lead us to question the moral assumption behind the fourth premise of the local argument from evil. Recall the premise:

- (P4) If an omnipotent, morally perfect creator exists and there is a world  $w$  without the contingent, pointless evil, the omnipotent, morally perfect creator would create a world at least as good as  $w$ .<sup>7</sup>

(P4) seems true only if we assume that moral perfection requires that God eliminate every contingent pointless evil. But van Inwagen argues that when faced with a practical sorites problem, a moral agent is not obligated to eliminate every pointless evil. He proposes a series of cases to motivate his rejection of the assumption behind (P4). For example:

### ***The Sentencing Official Sorites***

Blodgett has committed a felonious assault and justice dictates that he now go to prison. Suppose you are an official charged with determining exactly how many days he spends

<sup>7</sup> In fact, van Inwagen (2006, 98) directs his counterexample at the following principle: “If a morally perfect creator could have left a certain horror out of the world he created, and if the world he created would have been no worse if that horror had been left out of it than it would have been if it had included that horror, then the morally perfect creator would have left that horror out of the world he created – or at any rate he would have left it out if he had been able to.” I have condensed it for ease of exposition.



in prison. You intend to hand down the best overall sentence – the sentence that meets the standards of justice without causing Blodgett any pointless suffering. The policy you follow is this: *If  $n$  is a just sentence for assault and there is no shorter sentence that is just, then give Blodgett the sentence. Otherwise, check the policy for  $n - 1$  days.* Some possible sentences are determinately unjust: 0 days is far too little and 100 years is far too much. Other sentences are in the penumbra: it is just not determinate whether they are the minimum just sentence. You begin by proposing a sentence of 1023 days. Blodgett protests that a sentence of 1022 days would also meet the standards of justice and would cause him slightly less suffering. So if you are committed to handing down the best overall sentence, you ought to reduce his sentence by at least one day. Blodgett can continue to file appeal after appeal of this nature. As the sentencing official, you will either be marched appeal-by-appeal to reduce his sentence to an unjustly low number of days or you will dig in your heels at an arbitrary point in the appeals process. (See van Inwagen 2006, 101–102 for discussion of the case.)

To make sure Blodgett serves some just sentence, you must allow him to serve at least one day in prison that causes him suffering and is not required by the dictates of justice. Judges often face a practical sorites because what counts as just admits of indeterminacy, actual crimes fall in the range of indeterminate cases, and the mandates of the law are highly determinate. It seems the rational way to respond to such situations is to enforce an arbitrary distinction among members of the indeterminate range. So here is a case where a powerful, morally motivated agent exists, there is an action that is overall better than the one the agent actually takes, but the agent is morally justified in his choice of action.

Van Inwagen thinks that for all we know, God is in a situation very similar to that of the sentencing judge. He argues that the expanded free will defense gives rise to a divine practical sorites problem:

### ***The Divine Plan Sorites***

Creating a world requires creating a world with some amount of evil. Suppose that amounts of evil are some aggregate of the number of instances of suffering and their magnitude, represented by non-negative integers. And suppose God adopts the following policy: *If  $n$  is an amount of evil that realizes my plan of creation and redemption and there is no lesser amount of evil that realizes the plan, then create the world with  $n$  evil. Otherwise check the policy for a world with  $n - 1$  evil.* Some of the possible values for  $n$  determinately do not satisfy the condition for realizing God's plan. For example, God would not allow a world with little to no evil, since in such a world, free Fallen creatures would not appreciate the consequences of their actions or cooperate with the divine plan of redemption. Worlds on the other extreme are also impermissible: if world history were one continuous epoch of intense human suffering, then God would have no moral justification for creating the world. We may wonder exactly how much evil God needs to allow to realize his plan of creation and redemption. Van Inwagen thinks it is indeterminate whether the actual amount of evil is the amount that best serves God's plan of creation and redemption. And so there is a possible world with slightly less evil such that it also realizes God's plans. But God did not create that world. (See van Inwagen 2006, 106.)

Faced with practical sorites problems, the best we can do is arbitrarily choose one of the points in the indeterminate range to enforce the policy. In God's case, the mandates to create or not create are determinate, and the range of possible worlds to choose among is vast. For all we know, it is indeterminate whether the actual amount of evil is dictated by the expanded free will defense. So for all we know, a practical sorites problem led an omnipotent and morally perfect creator to create our world rather than a similar, slightly better one that is also in the indeterminate range. If the counterexample works, (P4) of the local argument from evil is false.<sup>8</sup> Using van Inwagen's defense, theists can maintain that there are some pointless evils without succumbing to the local argument from evil.

## Objections to van Inwagen's Defense

There are at least three objections one might raise to the practical sorites strategy for justifying pointless evils. I will present each in the voice of the objector, and then offer replies. Note that I assume that the objector agrees with the broadly consequentialist moral principle that motivates the local argument from evil surveyed in the introduction.

**OBJECTION 1:** *Van Inwagen's account of pointless evils does not improve upon the usual skeptical theist responses.*

All van Inwagen shows is that *for all we know*, there may be pointless evils because, for all we know, the expanded free will defense is true and God faced a practical sorites problem. He still does not give us any claim to be justified in believing the Holocaust, the fawn, or the rape and murder *are* pointless evils. So he has not improved on the usual skeptical responses to the local argument from evil—the responses which insist that for all we know there are no identifiable, contingent, and pointless evils.

**REPLY:** He has improved on the usual skeptical theist strategy, because van Inwagen's response to the local argument from evil could be taken up just as well by a theodist, someone who thinks they are justified in their beliefs about why God permits evil. A theodist could insist that the actual world is probably in the range of worlds that fulfill God's plan of creation and redemption, and that some evils are, nonetheless, gratuitous. So on its own, pointless evil does not provide evidence against the existence of an omnipotent, morally perfect creator. So the local argument is defanged for the skeptical theist and theodist alike.

**OBJECTION 2:** *A divine moral sorites would entail that divine justice is defective.*

There is an important disanalogy between the case of the sentencing official and the case of God. The sentencing official must operate with an imperfect standard of justice. He only has to make an arbitrary distinction between sentences because his policy's condition was imperfectly formulated. Indeed, if a given policy is susceptible to a sorites problem, that *shows* that the policy is imperfect. It reflects the limitations of the policymaker. But the divine policy of creation and redemption is perfect, and the divine policymaker is without defect. Therefore, God's policy of creation and redemption cannot be susceptible

8 For quite different reasons, Adams also argues that God is not morally obligated to create the best world he can. Adams's argument assumes a nonconsequentialist value theory and contends that God has duties to actual people, but no parallel duties to merely possible people in nearby worlds. See Adams (1972).

to a sorites problem. The examples of practical sorites problems that van Inwagen adduces are no evidence that God must allow pointless evils.

**REPLY:** Why think that a policy's sorites-susceptibility entails that it is defective? The objection assumes that God would only formulate policies with determinate conditions and mandates, but van Inwagen argues that nothing in our understanding of God's nature requires this. As he puts it in van Inwagen (1995a, 103), "One might as well suppose that if God's purposes require an impressively tall prophet to appear at a certain time and place, there is a minimum height that such a prophet could have." We may even have reason to believe that some of God's policies must be indeterminate. For example, in van Inwagen (1995b), he suggests that part of God creating and maintaining a chancy world with free agents consists in him issuing indeterminate decrees. An indeterminate decree is a decree with a disjunctive form. For example, God may decree, "In March, let Alice accept a bribe or let her reject it." The upshot of an indeterminate decree is that God can be thought to be sustaining Alice (and everything else) through his decrees. But he cannot be thought to have willed that Alice accept the bribe, should that disjunct come about. If you think, like van Inwagen, that God can sustain the world by something like indeterminate decrees, then you ought to agree that the mere fact that a policy is indeterminate does not entail that it is defective.

**OBJECTION 3:** *Van Inwagen's defense is incompatible with prominent theories of indeterminacy.*

This last objection is somewhat more complex, but just as urgent. What view of indeterminacy does van Inwagen have in mind when he insists that it is indeterminate how much evil realizes the divine plan? Up until now, we have been somewhat cagey about how we should understand indeterminacy. But neither of the two most popular accounts of indeterminacy – the semantic theory and epistemicism – support van Inwagen's argument. And absent a convincing theory of indeterminacy, we should not believe that God is susceptible to a practical sorites problem. Take each of the two popular theories in turn.

On the semantic theory, indeterminacy is a feature of language that results from semantic indecision. (See Fine 1975 and Lewis 1993 for formulations of this theory.) A sentence is indeterminate if and only if there are multiple candidate meanings for one of its terms, and on some candidate meanings, the sentence is true, and on others, it is false. For example, the sentence "1023 days is a just sentence for assault" may be indeterminate because there are multiple candidate meanings for the predicate *is a just sentence for assault*. On some admissible interpretations for the predicate, 1023 counts as just. On other interpretations, only values less than 1023 are admissible. According to the semantic approach, the judge faces a practical sorites problem because the meanings of our predicates of justice are underdetermined. If we settled the meanings of all of the terms in his policy, he would no longer need to arbitrarily choose a sentence. He could choose whatever lowest value falls in the interpretation of the predicate *is a just sentence for assault*.

We cannot carry over this analysis to the case of God's plan of creation. According to the defense, God permits pointless evils because God faces a practical sorites problem – a problem of applying a policy with indeterminate conditions. And according to the semantic theory, indeterminacy can be resolved if language is made more precise. But there is no reason to think that truths about the moral permissibility of pointless evil depend on how language is fixed. For example, suppose the actual amount of evil is  $n$ . And suppose future generations of speakers come to fix the meaning of the predicate *is a necessary amount of evil to realize the divine plan* to include only numbers slightly less than  $n$ . Then on every

admissible meaning of the predicate, the sentence “The actual amount of evil is necessary to realize the divine plan” will be false. Would God then be immoral for creating the actual world when he determinately could have done better? Why should truths about God’s justice depend at all on our linguistic practices? Perhaps the proponent of the semantic account of vagueness will respond that God’s policy is stated in his own intractably indeterminate language, and that is why truths about divine justice are not hostage to changes in our human language. But then we are left defending the thesis that God has a unique language and he refuses to specify the meaning of some terms in it. This seems like a stretch.

Epistemicism is the second prominent theory of indeterminacy. According to epistemicism, there is a single denotation for every term, but indeterminacy comes about because some terms are such that it is impossible to know their denotation. The meanings of some terms are fixed in an inscrutable way. (See Williamson 1994.) For a toy example: an epistemicist might contend that there is a number of days that constitutes a minimum just prison sentence for assault, but we will never know the number, because it is impossible to know how the meaning of *is a just sentence for assault* was fixed. As with the semantic theory, it is hard to see how the epistemicist could make sense of van Inwagen’s claim that God is susceptible to a practical sorites. First, God is omniscient, so presumably even if we do not know how the meanings of our terms have been fixed, he does. He knows every detail of the causal–historical processes, the intentional states, and the semantic laws that went into fixing our shared language. Second, according to epistemicism, there is an amount of evil that realizes God’s plan of creation and redemption. So if God allows even one evil beyond this amount, he is not morally perfect. He did not create the unique and objectively best world.

On either of the two most common theories of vagueness, practical sorites problems do not convincingly explain why God would allow pointless evils.

**REPLY:** In response to this objection, van Inwagen and his supporters ought to take a skeptical stance toward the underlying theories of indeterminacy. Everyone involved in this debate can admit that the debate over vagueness is far from decided, and both the semantic theory and epistemicism have counterintuitive consequences. The semantic theory requires revision of our standard theories of truth, since it requires sentence truth be judged relative to precisifications of meaning. And epistemicism forces us to admit there is a single fixed denotation for terms like “bald” and “just.” As it turns out, van Inwagen is neither an epistemicist nor a proponent of the semantic theory. (At one point, in considering the theories, he urges readers to “Let us leave them and return to the bright world of good sense.” See van Inwagen 2006, 107.) In other work on composition and ontology, he defends a theory of metaphysical vagueness (e.g., see sections 17–19 of van Inwagen (1990)). Van Inwagen thinks there is a kind of indeterminacy *in the world* – indeterminacy that is not a function of ignorance or underdetermined language. According to proponents of metaphysical vagueness, even if we knew the meanings for all of our terms, it may still not be determinate whether a certain man is bald, whether a certain punishment is just or whether a certain world has the amount of evil that best realizes the divine plan. This theory of metaphysical vagueness will mesh with his defense to the local argument from evil. And faced with trading one of the popular, but nonetheless counterintuitive theories of vagueness for a novel and powerful response to the local argument from evil, I suspect some theists will happily strike the bargain. Still those who would take van Inwagen’s defense are left with the difficult task of explaining metaphysical indeterminacy. This is among the most pressing worries for his theory.

## Applications: Universalism and the Fall

Suppose you have been convinced that van Inwagen has a viable response to the local argument from evil. How far can the practical sorites strategy extend? One of the more interesting variants of the argument from evil targets nonuniversalists – theists who believe in a populated Heaven and a populated Hell. Presumably, God has the power to determine who will be saved and who will be damned. Eternal damnation seems to many a particularly unjust evil that God not only permits but facilitates. And the threat of Hell features as a part of van Inwagen's expanded free will defense. (See van Inwagen 2006, 89.) Though van Inwagen never addresses the problem of Hell directly, his defense against the local argument from evil has an interesting application to traditional theist views of the afterlife. In this final section, I will tentatively survey this application. I will also suggest a related argument that improves the prospects for reconciling the expanded free will defense with gradual human evolution.

Sider (2002, 59) poses the following challenge for nonuniversalism: “any just criterion must judge created beings by a standard that comes in degrees, or admits of borderline cases; but no such criterion can remain simultaneously just – or at least non-arbitrary – and consistent with the nature of the (non-universalist) afterlife.” Sider develops this into an argument against nonuniversalist theism. In particular, he targets nonuniversalists who believe that (1) the afterlife is binary (there are exactly two possible eventual outcomes for a person – determinately go to Heaven or determinately go to Hell), (2) where a person ends up is determined in some part by how he lives his life, and (3) God's rewards and punishments are just. Sider's argument runs as follows:

- (1) Whatever matters to salvation varies by degrees. For any criterion God may sensibly use to judge us, there is a sorites series of saints and sinners – an ordering of persons from most to least deserving of salvation and that ordering admits of gradual changes. (e.g., we might order people by how many good works they performed, how often they prayed, the intensity of their devotion, their degree of cooperation with the plan of salvation, or any combination of criteria).
- (2) Given nonuniversalism, there must be some sharp cutoff in the series such that individuals before that point go to Heaven and individuals after that point go to Hell. Call the person closest to this point on the Heaven side “A” and the person closest to this point on the Hell side “B”.
- (3) Going to Heaven is a drastically better outcome for a person than going to Hell.
- (4) Given (3), B is overall much, much worse off than A.
- (5) But given (1), B is very similar to A with respect to whatever matters most to salvation.
- (6) Justice requires that the magnitude of a benefit or punishment should be proportional to the desert of the agent. If two individuals have similar moral standing, they should receive similar punishments or rewards.
- (7) Given (4) and (5), whatever criterion God imposes to distinguish A and B will violate a requirement of justice.
- (C) So there is no just criterion, and nonuniversalist theism is false.

There are ways to resist the argument. One might, for instance, deny the first premise and insist that salvation is a grace freely given to some and it is not at all determined by how

a person lives. One might deny that the ordering of saints and sinners is a sorites series and so insist that there is a great moral difference between A and B. One might even deny that Hell is much, much worse than Heaven for those who end up there.

But if a theist opts into van Inwagen's defense for the local argument from evil, he will have an economical means to block the argument at premise (6). The considerations that explain why God would not eliminate every pointless evil also explain why the criterion of proportional justice may not apply in sorites contexts. The defense runs as follows:

### *The Nonuniversalist Defense*

God has a criterion for salvation. And he has a policy of enforcing it that goes as follows: If a creature meets the criterion for salvation, then admit him to Heaven. Otherwise he will end up in Hell. In creating a chancy world with free creatures and orderly laws of nature, God risked creating people that would not meet that criterion. For all we know, that is his plan and this is the world he created. And for all we know, just as it is not determinate that there is a minimum number of horrors required to realize the divine plan, it is not determinate that there is a minimum cutoff for satisfying the criterion of salvation. For any person in the indeterminate range that God saves, he may just as well have saved a slightly worse person who is also in that range. But this is no moral flaw of God's, because – given that the criterion of salvation is indeterminate – it is not possible to always satisfy the proportional justice principle. In practical sorites situations, moral agents must arbitrarily discriminate between points in the series. For all we know, God faces a practical sorites in his plan of salvation. So, for all we know, premise (6) of Sider's argument is false.

The defense is very similar to the one offered for God's plan of creation and redemption. What is troubling is the stark difference between the mandates. In the original world-creation case, the nearby worlds merely suffer the misfortune of not being created. In the nonuniversalist case, person B suffers the actual misfortune of eternal damnation. And whereas in the previous cases, there seemed to be good reason to avoid the forced march to one extreme or another of the sorites series, in the case of Heaven and Hell, there does seem to be a good reason to prefer one extreme – it strikes many theists that there is good reason for God to choose a policy that admits everyone to Heaven. I do not wish to defend this in any detail as solution to the problem of Hell. Nor do I think that van Inwagen would particularly welcome it. But rather, I hope it shows the creative and fecund applications of the practical sorites defenses.

We can push the applications still further, and with respect to this second application, I am more optimistic that theists get something of real value. Recall that as van Inwagen formulates it, the expanded free will defense requires a single generation in human history when God miraculously raised our ancestors to rationality and freedom, precipitating their Fall. Some historical Fall assumption features in many orthodox Christian theodicies, and a sudden Fall seems indispensable to many philosophers who think that our special moral relationship with God is a function of our rationality and freedom. After all, the afterlife outcomes are determinate. But if rationality only developed gradually over a long period of evolutionary history, presumably there could be many generations of our human ancestors for whom it was only indeterminate whether they were rational and moral. How should God treat such creatures? Do they merit salvation or damnation? Or should they

be treated however mere animals are treated? If God's differential treatment of rational and nonrational creatures is to be just, it seems we must assume that the event of the our attaining freedom, rationality, and moral responsibility was sudden. It must have been the kind of event that could create a sharp distinction between humans with an intimate relationship to God and mere creatures. Still, as noted back in the first section, this sudden Fall assumption creates grave worries for the expanded free will defense, because a sudden Fall is in tension with any evolutionary account of human psychology that entails we developed our moral capacities very, very gradually.

But if the practical sorites defense is viable, then it can be used to argue that the sudden Fall assumption *is* dispensable. Suppose there was no pair of generations in human anthropology such that it was determinate that our ancestors were nonrational creatures, and then it was determinate that our ancestors were rational agents. Suppose, rather, that there was an epoch – probably a quite long one – such that it was indeterminate whether humans were rational enough to be held morally responsible. This need not threaten orthodox teachings about the Fall, since it may still be that for some generation in that indeterminate range, God deemed those creatures to be sufficiently developed to be held morally responsible for their actions. God did not have to pick that generation; other generations slightly earlier or later were very similar with respect to every trait that matters, and they might just as well have been chosen. In determining when man bore his image, God made an arbitrary but nevertheless morally acceptable distinction when faced with a practical sorites problem. The upshot? Those attracted to the free will defense need not think human rationality appeared suddenly and miraculously; we might just as well assume that God arbitrarily chose a generation in the indeterminate epoch to start holding mankind responsible.

What lessons should we take from all of this? Van Inwagen's approach to the local argument from evil has potentially far-reaching theological implications – affecting not only how we think of the problem of pointless evils, but also how we think about arguments for universalism and the Fall. His overall approach offers us a model of providence where an all-powerful and morally perfect God must implement determinate policies in a world of intractable indeterminacy. This model will not please every theist, but it is an innovative version of the longstanding free will defense. And for those of us inclined to think that we are somewhat reliable detectors of pointless evils around us, van Inwagen's defense has much to recommend it.

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to Trent Dougherty, John Hawthorne, Dan Howard-Snyder, Justin McBrayer, Tian Ping, Mike Rea, two anonymous referees, the Religion and Metaphysics Reading Group at Notre Dame and audiences at Siena Heights University and Peking University.

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# A Defense Without Free Will

DERK PEREBOOM

Skepticism about free will has historically been a suspect position among theists. One prominent concern is that denying free will rules out any promising solution, or at least the best solutions, to the problem of evil. In reply, I will argue that the free will skeptic has available many of the resources for addressing the problem of evil that are employed by antiskeptics about free will, and that a case can be made that the responses that involve an essential appeal to free will are not especially powerful. As a result, the theist who is a free will skeptic is not at a significant disadvantage in coping with the problem of evil.

## Skepticism about Free Will

What is free will skepticism? A core concern in the historical free will debate is whether the sort of free will required for moral responsibility of a central kind is compatible with the causal determination of our actions by factors beyond our control. Since Hume, this concern has prominently been extended to whether this sort of free will is compatible with indeterminacy in action (Hume 1739/1978). On the skeptical view, free will, characterized in this way, is incompatible with this type of causal determination, but also with indeterminism, or at least with any sort of indeterminism that is likely to be actual. It is crucial, however, to recognize that the term “moral responsibility” is used in a variety of ways, and that the type of free will or control required for moral responsibility in some of these senses is uncontroversially compatible with the causal determination of action by factors beyond our control, which have therefore not been at issue in the debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists. It is potentially open to the free will skeptic to affirm that we are morally responsible in these other senses.

The particular variety of moral responsibility that has been at issue in the historical debate is set apart by the notion of *basic desert*. For an agent to be morally responsible for an action in this sense is for it be hers in such a way that she would deserve to be the

recipient of an expression of moral resentment or indignation if she understood that it was morally wrong, and she would deserve to be the recipient of an expression of gratitude or praise if she understood that it was morally exemplary. The desert at issue here is basic in the sense that the agent, to be morally responsible, would deserve to be the recipient of the expression of such an attitude just because she has performed the action, given sensitivity to its moral status, not, for example, by virtue of consequentialist or contractualist considerations. One might be the recipient of the expression of such an attitude when this expression is either covert or overt. Moral responsibility in this sense is presupposed by our attitudes of resentment, indignation, gratitude, and moral praise, since having such an attitude essentially involves the supposition that the agent in question basically deserves to be the recipient of its expression. It is thus the variety of moral responsibility that P. F. Strawson (1962) brings to the fore in his “Freedom and Resentment.” The free will skeptic thus denies that we have the sort of free will required for us to be responsible for our action in the basic desert sense (Spinoza 1677; Priestley 1788; G. Strawson 1986; Smilansky 2000; Pereboom 2001).

It would be an attractive option for a free will skeptic who is also a theist to endorse theological determinism. One perennial concern for theological determinism is that it threatens to have God be the author of sin, for our sinful intentions, decision, and actions would be caused by God. Here the free will skeptic has an advantage over the theological compatibilist.<sup>1</sup> On the skeptical version, God is the cause of our bad actions, but because we are not blameworthy for our actions in the basic desert sense, God is not the cause of actions for which we then deserve, in the basic sense, blame. On the skeptical view, God’s causing our immoral intentions and actions is more similar to causing natural evils, such as earthquakes and diseases, than it is on a position according to which we are blameworthy in the basic desert sense. As a result, the concern that God is the author of sin is closer to a problem that all traditional theists face, how God can cause or allow natural evil. This removes at least some of the sting of the charge that God is the author of sin.

## The Free Will Theodicy

A potential drawback for the denial of free will in the sense at issue is that it precludes the free will theodicy, at least in its standard forms, which is often thought to be the most powerful defense we have of divine goodness in the face of evil (see Chapter 14).<sup>2</sup> The free will theodicy in systematized form dates back at least to early Christianity and perhaps to Zoroastrianism, and remains the most prominent and widely advocated of all theodicies (see Chapter 12). In the standard version, we have libertarian free will – that is, the sort of

1 Perhaps the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) had hard determinist views, at least early in his career. I was made aware of this possibility by Andrew Dole’s “Schleiermacher’s Early Essay on Freedom,” a paper he presented at a conference of the Society for Christian Philosophers in Bloomington, Indiana, in September 2002. The manuscript version of Schleiermacher’s essay has no title. In *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Schleiermacher 1983), it appears as “Über die Freiheit” (KGA I.1 1984, 217–357), which has been translated into English as *On Freedom* (Schleiermacher 1992).

2 In this discussion, I presuppose that the evidential version of the problem of evil is at issue; see Chapter 4 in this book and also Rowe (1979; 1986; 1996; 2001), Draper (1989; 1992), Tooley (1991), Russell and Wykstra (1988), and Plantinga (1998).

free will required for moral responsibility in the basic desert sense, where this sort of free will is conceived as incompatible with determinism, and hence determinism is false. God had the option of creating or refraining from creating beings with libertarian free will that is *significant* – that is, beings with libertarian free will who can make choices between right and wrong. A risk God takes by creating beings with these powers is that they might exercise their freedom in making immoral choices, and, because they are free in the libertarian sense, God's power to prevent such choices would be limited. But the benefits include the existence of creatures who are morally responsible for their actions in the basic desert sense, and who are undetermined creators in their own right. Because the benefits outweigh the risks, God is morally justified in creating such significantly free beings, and he is not culpable when they choose badly.

Free will in the sense at issue in the historical debate is evidently essential to this account. But how does it fare as a theodicy for the most horrible evils? An often-cited shortcoming is that many of the more horrible evils would not seem to be or result from freely willed decisions. Injury, suffering, and death due to natural phenomena such as earthquakes, tornados, tsunamis, and diseases – including mental illnesses that give rise to unfree immoral choices – would not seem to result from freely willed decisions, and for this reason, we count them as natural as opposed to moral evils. A further concern is that even if we do have free will of the libertarian sort, and many of our choices are freely willed in this libertarian sense, God could still have prevented much of the evil that is attendant on such choices. Given the nature of libertarian free will, short of killing evil people or disabling their wills, God might not have been able to prevent them from making evil decisions, but God could have nonetheless prevented or limited the evil consequences of those decisions (Mackie 1955; Boër 1978). God might have prevented Nazi genocide, by, say, by rendering the Nazi guns, trains, and gas chambers ineffective.

One response to these sorts of concerns about the free will theodicy is Richard Swinburne's: if God were to regularly prevent evils in this last type of way, then we would not fully understand the kinds of consequences our decisions would naturally have, and this would have considerable disvalue (see Chapter 14). In response, one might argue that God might have intervened earlier yet in the process, by, for example, preventing or healing the childhood abuse and trauma that result in immoral motivation. Or rather than intervening, God might have designed us so that we were less vulnerable to the kinds of psychological problems that play a role in motivating immoral decisions.

Swinburne has pressed an important response to these last objections as well. He contends that it is not just freely willed decision *tout court* that has high intrinsic value, but two additional features of free decisions: such a decision accomplishing what the agent intended – this he refers to as *efficacious* free will, and its adjudicating between good and evil options, each of which genuinely motivate the agent – which he calls *serious* free will. Swinburne proposes that serious and efficacious free will has intrinsic value high enough to justify God frequently to refrain from preventing the evil consequences of immoral decisions. In his view, first of all, “the very fact of the agent having a free choice is a great good for the agent; and a greater good the more serious the kind of free will, even if it is incorrectly used.” Furthermore, a free agent “is an ultimate source in an even fuller way if the choices open to him cover the whole moral range, from the very good to the very wrong.” Indeed, “an agent who has serious and efficacious free will is in a much fuller way an ultimate source of the direction of things in the world” than one who does not (Swinburne 1999, 82–89). Moreover, in preparation for his theodicy, Swinburne contends that:

It is a good for us if our experiences are not wasted but are used for the good of others, if they are the means of a benefit which would not have come to others without them, which will at least in part compensate for those experiences. It follows from this insight that it is a blessing for a person if the possibility of his suffering makes possible the good for others of having the free choice of hurting or harming them . . . and of choosing to show or not show sympathy. (Swinburne 1999, 103)

This account is important, because it amounts to the natural way to extend the free will theodicy to explain why God allows immoral free decisions and their evil consequences in cases when God could have prevented them.

To illustrate the upshot of these claims for theodicy, Swinburne discusses the example of the slave trade from Africa in the eighteenth century:

But God allowing this to occur made possible innumerable opportunities for very large numbers of people to contribute or not to contribute to the development of this culture; for slavers to choose to enslave or not; for plantation-owners to choose to buy slaves or not and to treat them well or ill; for ordinary white people and politicians to campaign for its abolition or not to bother, and to campaign for compensation for the victims or not to bother; and so on. There is also the great good for those who themselves suffered as slaves that their lives were not useless, their vulnerability to suffering made possible many free choices, and thereby so many steps towards the formation of good or bad character. (Swinburne 1999, 245)

A first problem for this line of thought is that it is at odds with ordinary moral practice when horrendous evil is at issue. As David Lewis points out, ordinarily for us, the evildoer's freedom is a weightless consideration, not merely an outweighed consideration (Lewis 1993, 155). When the slave traders come to take your children, and you are considering violent resistance in their defense, we do not expect you to consider the putative value of the slave traders' efficacious and serious but immoral free will. Moreover, if Swinburne is right, when 10 slave traders have freely decided to try to take your children away, five times as much value of the sort he proposes would be at issue as when there are only two, and there would be proportionally more reason not to resist. Moreover, all else being equal, there would be considerably less reason to harm in defense of others an assailant who appears to have free will than one who is evidently mentally ill and incapable of free decisions.<sup>3</sup> This sort of moral reasoning has no role in our ordinary moral practice, and is at odds with widespread moral intuitions.<sup>4</sup>

A further problem for the free will theodicy addresses Swinburne's proposal that to choose freely to do what is right, one must have a serious countervailing desire to refrain from doing what is right instead, strong enough that it could actually motivate a choice so to refrain (Swinburne 1999, 85–86). He contends that this point supports the free will theodicy, because it can explain why God allows us to have desires to do evil, and also why God allows us to make choices in accord with those desires. But this claim rather serves to undermine the force of the free will theodicy as an explanation for many horrendous evils. We do not generally believe that the value of a free choice outweighs the disvalue of having desires to perform horribly evil actions, especially if the desires are strong enough to result

3 Mark Moyer made this point in conversation.

4 One might object that these intuitions do not carry over to the relationship between God and us, given its specific nature, but that case would need to be made.

in action. The claim that it is more valuable than not for people to have a strong desire to abuse children for the reason that this gives them the opportunity to choose freely not to do so has no plausibility for us. Our practice – and common religious practice in particular – is rather to encourage therapy to diminish or eradicate such desires. We do not believe that the value of a free decision not to abuse a child made in battle against a countervailing desire carries any weight against the proposal to provide this sort of therapy. Were we to encounter someone with a strong desire to abuse children but who nevertheless resisted actively seeking to do so, we would not judge that his condition has more value overall than one in which he never had the desire to abuse children in the first place. Moreover, my guess is that a high proportion of people alive today – well over 90% – has never intentionally chosen a horrible evil nor had a genuine struggle with a desire to do so. They have never, for instance, tortured, maimed, or murdered, nor seriously struggled with urges to do so. But we do not think that their lives would have had more value, or at least appreciably more value, had they possessed such desires even if every battle waged against them had been successful. It is therefore dubious that God would allow such desires in order to realize the value of certain free choices. This aspect of Swinburne's theodicy may have some credibility with respect to evils that are relatively mild, but much less when it comes to horrible evils. And if we believed free will did have the sort of intrinsic value Swinburne proposes, moral practice would be very different from what it is now – in ways that, given our actual moral sensibilities, we would find very disturbing.

## **The Retributive Punishment Theodicy**

Another traditional theodicy to which our having free will is essential is that God brings about or allows evil as punishment justified on retributivist grounds. The retributivist justification of punishment, according to which the punishment of a wrongdoer is justified on the ground that he deserves it just because he has knowingly committed a serious offense, is the one that most intimately invokes the basic desert sense of moral responsibility, together with the freedom it demands. The connection is this: a judgment that an agent is blameworthy in the basic desert sense for a serious offense involves the supposition that he also deserves, in the basic sense, to be punished. Thus, in rejecting the claim that we have the sort of free will required for moral responsibility in the basic desert sense, the free will skeptic also rejects the retributivist justification of punishment, and any theodicy to which it is essential.

Does this deprive the free will skeptic of what would otherwise be a powerful response to the problem of evil? No. It is implausible to think that in William Rowe's example, the five-year-old girl deserves to be punished by being raped and beaten by virtue of anything she has done (Rowe 1996). Does an ordinary person, never having committed a serious crime, and who is not in any other respect an extraordinary sinner, deserve to suffer from a lengthy painful and fatal disease as punishment, justified retributivistically, for the wrongs he has done?<sup>5</sup> Our judicial system would regard punishment of this sort for serious crimes as monstrous. Imagine if we were to punish murderers by inducing such suffering – who would find that conscionable?

5 For an opposing perspective, see William Alston (1991), section V.

Someone might reply that since each of us deserves an eternity of torture, *a fortiori* each of us also deserves suffering of this sort. But since it is doubtful that anyone genuinely understands why we all might deserve punishment of this degree as a matter of retributive justice alone, this line of thought does not promise a plausible theodicy. Even thinking of ordinary people, who make moral errors from time to time, as deserving a long and painful disease, would constitute a serious revision in our moral practice. What we assume instead is that for such ordinary people, sympathy without reservation is the appropriate response.<sup>6</sup>

## Agnosticism (or Skeptical Theism)

Which responses to the problem of evil are open to the free will skeptic? A number of prominent attempts do not involve the sort of free will that has been at issue in the historical debate as an essential component. Among them are the soul-building theodicy proposed by John Hick (see Chapter 14), Marilyn Adams's account in which suffering serves as a vehicle for identification between God and us (see Chapter 18), and Eleonore Stump (1985) suggestion that evil is a means to heal a defect in the will. The best response available to those who deny that we have this type of free will – and arguably to anyone else as well – appeals in addition to the limitations of our understanding. Such a strategy has become known as *skeptical theism*, but given the unfortunate connotations of this term, I will follow Daniel Howard-Snyder (2009) and call it *agnosticism*, that is, agnosticism about the nature of the good that limits or defeats the evidential force that the evils of this world have for the nonexistence of God (see Chapter 29). This view has been developed in recent times by Stephen Wykstra (1984; 1996) and William Alston (1991; 1996), among others.<sup>7</sup> Later, I will discuss the responses of Hick, Adams, and Stump as ways of filling out and strengthening the Agnostic proposal, which I will now set out.

When a one-year old is taken to the doctor for painful shots, he will not understand the nature of the good that justifies the doctor in giving him the shots, even though there really is such a good, and as a result he will not understand that having these shots is good for him overall. By analogy, we might hypothesize that the evils that we suffer are often such that we do not understand the goods that justify God in causing or allowing them, even though there really are such goods, and these evils are on balance to our benefit. This is the Agnostic's claim. She contends that the nature of the good is or at least might be beyond our understanding to such a degree that we should not expect to understand how it is that God's governance of the universe accords with his goodness.

According to Agnosticism, due to the limitations of our cognitive capacities, we should be skeptical of the view that the facts about evil in the world count as good evidence against the existence of God. Skeptical claims are often supported by skeptical hypotheses – a story

6 This general issue is raised in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John, which begins as follows:

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (John 9:1–3)

7 See Bergmann (2000; 2001; 2009), Bergmann and Rea (2005), Howard-Snyder and Bergmann (2001a; 2001b), and Howard-Snyder (1996a; 2009), McBrayer (2004; 2010).



that builds in the skeptical claim and is true for all we know (see Chapter 27). For example, the skeptical proposal that my beliefs about the external world are false can be supported by the hypothesis that I am now dreaming, as Descartes points out. Similarly, skepticism about the claim that facts about evil in the world count as good evidence against the existence of God can be supported by a hypothesis that invokes limitations in our ability to understand the kinds of goods there are that might justify God in causing or allowing suffering.

An advantageous way of understanding how Agnosticism addresses the problem of evil is as a way of mitigating the extent to which the world's evils reduce the probability of God's existence (or reduce the rational credence that God exists) (Pereboom 2004). Let *E* be a proposition that details the kinds and amount of evil that the world features, and *G* be that hypothesis that God exists. What is the probability of *G* supposing *E* – the probability that God exists given the kinds and amounts of evil in the world? According to Agnosticism, because of the limited nature of our cognitive capacity to understand the nature of the good, *E* does not reduce the probability of *G* to the extent that it would if we did not take our lack of understanding into account.<sup>8</sup>

Various formulations of Agnosticism agree that we do or might well have only limited cognitive capacities for understanding the nature of the good. Significantly, they diverge in their assessment of the consequence this limitation has for our rational attitude toward the existence of the requisite God-justifying goods. In one version, because our cognitive capacities for understanding the nature of the good are limited, we are in no position to deny – or, equivalently, we are in no position to rule out – that there are moral or axiological reasons for God's allowing the world's evils to occur, even if we have no sense as to what these reasons might be, and thus we have no good reason for believing that not-*G* is more likely on *E* than *G* is. But this statement of the position is vulnerable, for, by close analogy, it would then be too easy to generate skepticism about an accepted scientific theory's being well-supported by the evidence. For example, it is generally agreed that quantum mechanics (QM) is well supported by the relevant evidence (EV), in the sense that QM is highly probable on EV given our background knowledge. (If you disagree, substitute, say, the DNA theory of the transmission of genetic information.) However, the skeptic points out that because our cognitive capacities for understanding physics are limited, we are in no position rationally to dismiss the claim that there is a currently unspecified theory distinct from QM that is metaphysically more plausible and that explains EV as well as QM does. From this, he contends, we can draw the conclusion that we have no good reason to believe that QM is more likely on EV than not. But this is clearly not plausible. The general problem is that rationally assigning a high probability to some proposition on the basis of the evidence is compatible with not being in a position to rule out some unspecified alternative hypothesis. Thus, one's not being in a position to rule out the existence of some unspecified God-justifying purpose for some evil is compatible with rationally assigning a high probability to there being no such purpose.

The attractive remedy is to supplement Agnosticism with more developed skeptical hypotheses, with more thoroughly specified stories that would render the skeptical claim true. A crucial question is whether the extent to which Agnosticism is credible depends on

8 Or else (van Inwagen 1996, 228) this limitation makes it the case that we cannot reasonably assign a probability to *G* supposing *E* in the first place.

the plausibility of such hypotheses. In the QM case, an analogous claim would clearly hold – the credibility of skepticism about QM would depend on the plausibility of the skeptic’s hypothesis. But note that in the QM case, it seems clear that the lowering effect of a skeptical hypothesis on the probability of the claim that the skeptic targets is just a function of the probability of the skeptical hypothesis. So the lower the probability of a skeptical hypothesis about the support EV provides for QM, the smaller its lowering effect on the probability of QM on EV. The analogous claim would seem to hold for Agnosticism. The lower the probability of an Agnostic hypothesis, the smaller its lowering effect on not-G given E – that is, the smaller its lowering effect on the proposition that God does not exist given the kinds and amounts of the evils in the world. So it would appear that a plausible Agnosticism requires a skeptical hypothesis or a set of such hypotheses whose probability is significantly high.

To secure an effective response to the problem of evil, we would thus need to fill out the Agnostic’s main claim by hypotheses with appreciably high probabilities. Van Inwagen’s development of the view involves devising such “defense” hypotheses that would show that *we are in no position to judge* that the sufferings of this world are improbable on the existence of God (see Chapter 27). In his conception, a defense of the right sort must first of all be a reasonably well-specified hypothesis that is true for all anyone knows, and not simply one that we are in no position to deny. Then, if a defense of this sort (D) can be found such that S (a proposition that details the actual degree of the world’s suffering) is highly probable on G (God exists) and D, and, crucially, is such that we are in no position to make a judgment about the probability of D on G, then it will have been established that we are in no position to judge that S is improbable on the existence of God.<sup>9</sup> Free will skeptics can employ the proposals of Hick, Adams, and Stump as such defense hypotheses, since they do not essentially invoke the sort of free will that has been at issue in the traditional debate.

But before discussing those specific proposals, a further challenge to the Agnostic position should be noted, according to which the degree of skepticism to which the Agnostic is committed generalizes to skeptical claims that are unacceptable, or at any rate, skeptical claims that actual Agnostics would not accept. One important version of this challenge has been advanced by Bruce Russell (1989; 1996), and he proposes that this view will have skeptical consequences for our moral practice<sup>10</sup> (see Chapter 30). If the theist claims that there are goods not fully understood by us that could not have been realized had God prevented various horrible evils, and that God might well be justified in allowing these evils in order to realize those goods, then there might well be situations in which we fail

9 van Inwagen ([1991] 1996, 228) argues that judgments of epistemic probability are judgments about possible world proportions. In accordance with that conception, he expresses the (valid) general principle at work here as follows:

We are not in a position to judge that only a small proportion of the p-worlds are q-worlds if there is a proposition h that has the following two features:

- A large proportion of the p & h worlds are q-worlds.
- We are not in a position to make a judgment about the proportion of the p-worlds that are h-worlds.

10 For further discussion of this objection, see Almeida and Oppy (2003), Trakakis (2003; 2007), Trakakis and Nagasawa (2004), Pereboom (2004; 2005); Jordan (2006), Piper (2007), Schnall (2007), Howard-Snyder (2009), and Maitzen (2009).

to prevent evils of these kinds where we do no wrong. In fact, we may on some such occasions be obligated not to prevent these evils. Or at the very least, we might at times have to give serious consideration to reasons not to prevent those evils when ordinary moral practice does not feature giving serious consideration to such reasons. Let us call this *the challenge from skeptical consequences for morality* (see Chapter 30).

Consider, for example, an Agnostic's claim that the following hypothesis is true for all we know: the value of retributive punishment justifies God in allowing certain horrible evils, whose point we cannot otherwise see. Suppose an Agnostic were to suggest the hypothesis that ordinary people suffer from painful diseases as retribution for sinful inner lives. It might well be that we are in no epistemic position to tell whether any ordinary person's inner life merits suffering of this kind. But weight given to this hypothesis would give rise to reasons to abandon the unreserved sympathy we have for ordinary people who suffer from painful diseases. This would constitute *a clear and immediate threat* to our moral practice.

Or consider the hypothesis that the intrinsic value of serious and efficacious free will justifies God in allowing certain horrible evils – whose point we cannot otherwise see. Weight given to this hypothesis would also pose a clear and immediate threat to our moral practice. For we would have reasonable beliefs as to where this intrinsic value is to be found and how to secure it, and this would then give rise to certain *prima facie* obligations. For example, we could have a reasonable belief as to whether a slave trader was freely willing his aims, and we would have a *prima facie* obligation to take the intrinsic value of his serious and efficacious free will into consideration in deciding what to do by way of defense against him. But again, as Lewis remarks, the value of free will is now a weightless consideration for us, and thus we would face a disruptive effect on our moral practice, which is at odds with widespread moral intuitions.

William Alston (1996), Daniel Howard-Snyder (1996a, 292–293; cf. 2009), and Michael Bergmann (2001) have replied to this objection by arguing that in morally justifying our actions, we are limited to goods that we understand, while the goods the Agnostic hypothesizes are at least to some degree beyond our understanding. But this does not seem right; our moral justifications should not be limited to goods we understand – as Russell points out. One might amplify Russell's contention in the following way (Pereboom 2004; 2005). Consider first an analogy to the Agnostic's perspective that features only human agents. Jack, a nurse, assists doctors in a clinic that specializes, among other things, in a painful bone disease. He has excellent reason to trust the doctors as thoroughly competent. The clinic stocks morphine as an analgesic, and Jack knows that if morphine were administered to the bone disease patients, their acute pain would be relieved. But the bone specialists never, in his experience, have given morphine to patients suffering from this disease, even though they, in his experience, have given it to other patients in the clinic. Jack has no inkling as to why the doctors do not administer the morphine to the bone disease patients. However, for all he knows, they might have given it to such patients in certain circumstances in the past, although he has no reasonable guess as to frequency, and he has no idea of what these circumstances might be. One day, as a result of bad weather, all the doctors are away from the clinic, but Jack is there. A patient is suffering from the bone disease, and Jack has the opportunity to administer morphine. It would seem that he has some significant moral reason not to do so.

Now consider the analogous situation. Sue, a doctor, knows that there have been thousands of cases of people suffering horribly from disease X. Suppose at a certain time she

becomes an Agnostic who believes that God is justified for the sake of goods beyond her ken in not preventing these thousands of cases of suffering (she trusts God in a way analogous to the way in which Jack trusts the bone specialists). Suppose that her belief in God is rational, and also that her belief regarding the God-justifying goods is rational. In addition, for all she knows, God in the past might have prevented people from suffering from this disease under certain circumstances, although she has no reasonable guess as to how often God might have done this, and she has no idea of what these circumstances might be. Around the same time a drug that cures disease X is invented and is made available to Sue, and she is now deciding whether to administer it. Sue's situation seems similar to Jack's: it would seem that insofar as Sue is rational in believing that God has significant moral reason to allow thousands of people to suffer from disease X, she has significant moral reason not to administer the drug that cures disease X. Consequently, this problem for Agnosticism is not as easily resolved as some of the advocates of this view have claimed.

### **Defense Hypotheses the Free Will Skeptic Can Accept and which are Compatible with Morality**

What is notable about the proposals of Hick, Adams, and Stump is that they can serve as reasonably well-specified defense hypotheses regarding goods of which we have some inkling, and they can in this way support Agnosticism without falling prey to the challenge from skeptical consequences for morality, since they do not result in a clear and immediate threat to our moral practice (Pereboom 2005; 2011). Consider first the soul-building theodicy that Hick (1978) develops, according to which evil is required for the best sort of human intellectual, technological, moral, and spiritual development. Suffering is valuable, on his account, because it occasions efforts whereby it might be overcome, and because improvement of character – both within an individual and throughout human history – results from such efforts. Without evil, there would be no stimulus to the development of economic, technological, and social structures, which are crucial to human civilization. Without evil, there would be no occasion for care for others, devotion to the general public good, courage, self-sacrifice, for the type of love that involves bearing one another's burdens, or for the kind of character that is built and fostered through these qualities.

The main difficulty for this sort of theodicy, which Hick is concerned to address, is that evils often do not give rise to the specified higher-order goods, and in fact sometimes destroy people rather than contributing to any such salutary results. Hick responds by arguing that such evils are only apparently without purpose. For in a world without such evils,

... human misery would not evoke deep personal sympathy or call forth organized relief and sacrificial help and service. For it is presupposed in these compassionate reactions both that the suffering is not deserved and that it is bad for the sufferer ... in a world that is to be the scene of compassionate love and self-giving for others, suffering must fall upon mankind with something of the haphazardness and inequity that we now experience. It must be apparently unmerited, pointless, and incapable of being morally rationalized. (Hick 1978, 334)

However, evils on the order of World War II or the bubonic plague are clearly not required to occasion virtuous responses of these kinds or the attendant personal development. But

still, it might be argued that these and similar calamities did in fact provide unusually challenging opportunities for virtuous responses, and that they did result in especially valuable instances of such responses. Yet one might doubt whether refraining from preventing these calamities could be justified by the expected or foreseen gain. Similarly, for more localized evils, such as a child suffering and dying of cerebral meningitis, one might doubt whether the good effects, such as sympathy and efforts to aid, could justify a failure to prevent them. It is telling that we would not consider the loss of occasion for virtue and character development as even a mild countervailing reason to the development of a vaccine for this disease. More generally, the pressing concern for the soul-building theodicy is that virtuous responses and admirable character development would be possible even if this world featured much, much, less apparently pointless suffering than it does, and even if allowing this suffering would result in some gain, the gain seems insufficient to justify it.

Still, the Agnostic does not aim to provide a positive theodicy, but only some indication of what the goods might be that justify God in permitting evil – perhaps partial reasons of a certain sort. This is a standard that the soul-building is more likely to meet. Hick is right to claim that there are cases of horrible evils that occasion various higher-order goods. To answer the objection that people die after suffering that seems to have no good effect on their lives, we can begin by citing life after death, where the suffering is redeemed.

For a Hick inspired defense hypothesis to be available to the skeptic about free will, it cannot be our capacity for basic desert-entailing freely willed choices that is educated and developed through the soul-building process, but rather the kinds of higher-order goods Hick cites conceived without this sort of freedom. If theological determinism is presupposed, it would need to be that this process of development and education is valuable even if it is determined by God. To my mind, it is plausible that the progress from cowardice to courage, from immorality to morality, from ignorance to enlightenment has value for us even if it is causally determined, and in particular even if it is causally determined by God.

One might doubt that this response is satisfactory. However, the skeptical theist does not aspire to provide a positive theodicy, but only some indication of what the goods might be that justify God in permitting evil – perhaps partial reasons of a certain sort, and these partial reasons might be gleaned from various theodicies that have been proposed. Perhaps we can say the soul-building theory yields such partial reasons. Hick is right to claim that there are cases of horrible evils that have had a profoundly good effect on people. This provides some degree of understanding of the idea that God causes or allows especially horrible evils for reasons of soul building. We seem incapable of answering the objections raised against it, but this is exactly what skeptical theism predicts: we do not thoroughly understand the nature of this good, and in particular not well enough to grasp why it is that God would cause or allow evil to realize it.

The theodicy that Adams develops can also be appropriated by the skeptical theist who accepts theological hard determinism. Her strategy (Adams 1999, 55) is to specify a possible scenario in which God is good to all persons by insuring each a life that is a great good to the person on the whole, not merely by balancing off but also by *defeating* her participation in horrendous evils within the context of the world as a whole and of that individual's life. On Roderick Chisholm's (1968/1969) characterization, an evil is balanced off within a larger whole if that whole features goods that equal or outweigh it, while an evil is defeated within a larger whole when it actually contributes to a greater good within that whole. In Adams's account, balancing off horrendous evil might be guaranteed by an afterlife in an environment in which we live in beatific intimacy with God. But actual defeat of such evil

is also possible, for it may be that God will defeat all human suffering by empathetically identifying with it, since this would allow human beings to reenvision their suffering as a point of identification with God: “by virtue of endowing horrors with a good aspect, Divine identification makes the victim’s experience of horrors so meaningful that she would not retrospectively wish it away” (Adams 1999, 167). Adams denies that participation in horrors is necessary for an individual’s incommensurate good, for “a horror-free life that ended in beatific intimacy with God would also be one in which the individual enjoyed incommensurate good” (Adams 1999, 167). One might thus question why God would allow anyone at all to suffer horrendous evil. Adams (1999, 165–166) acknowledges not to have any more than partial reasons in response to this question. But skeptical theism requires no more than partial reasons, for it does not propose a positive theodicy. This account of the defeat of evil also does not involve our having free will in the sense required for moral responsibility in the basic-desert sense, and can thus be accepted by the skeptic about the free will skeptic.

Eleonore Stump’s (1985) proposal is a further case in point. She advocates a version of the soul-building theodicy that adduces an explicitly theological good. She argues that moral and natural evil contribute to a humbling recognition of oneself as having a defective will, which in turn can motivate one to turn to God to fix the defect in the will. The defect in the will is that one has a bent toward evil, so that one has a diminished capacity to will what one ought to will. In Stump’s account, both the turning toward God and God’s fixing the will have considerable value for a person. No feature of this account demands a notion of free will of the sort required for moral responsibility in the basic desert sense, and thus the free will skeptic can accommodate the causal process that Stump specifies. In particular, nothing about this process requires that the agent be morally responsible in this sense for turning to God on the occasion of suffering.

Moreover, none of these three Agnostic defense hypothesis regarding other goods of which we have some inkling results in a clear and immediate threat to moral practice, and the reasons are epistemic. As Stump points out, it would be far from evident to us when suffering would have the beneficial effect of motivating the agent to turn to God, nor how much would be required to have this effect. So in this case, the undermining threat to our moral practice would not be clear and immediate. The same point can be made more generally for Hick’s soul-building theodicy. And the good of our identifying with God in suffering that Marilyn Adams discusses is like this as well. We would be completely in the dark as to when suffering would facilitate reenvisioning as point of identification with God. Here, a consideration raised by Swinburne (1999: 243), Alston (1996, 321), and Steve Layman<sup>11</sup> is also pertinent: the difference between God and us, or God’s relation to us, might be relevant when it comes to the justification of allowing bringing about suffering. Given God’s epistemic position relative to ours, there are goods for the sake of which God’s allowing or bringing about evil might well be justified while our doing the same would not. Taking stock, I would draw the following tentative conclusion: an Agnostic perspective that adduces defense hypotheses that essentially involve free will in the sense at issue in the free will debate gives rise to a particularly dire version of the challenge from skeptical consequences for morality, while this is not the case for an Agnosticism that invokes several prominent hypotheses that are independent of this sort of free will.

11 The comment by Steve Layman is in Howard-Snyder (1996a, 292).



## Acknowledgment

Thanks to Michael Bergmann, David Christensen, Mark Moyer, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and discussion.

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# Skeptical Theism, CORNEA, and Common Sense Epistemology

THOMAS D. SENOR

## Introduction

One way of getting a grip on the problem of evil is as follows: you are told a story about a far-away world that is brought into existence and providentially maintained by an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing being. This person is not only thoroughly benevolent but is also filled with limitless love. With this description of the creator and sustainer of this world, we are then to consider what we should expect this world to be like. Now there are a great many attributes one would have no reason to think likely or unlikely: that the population of rational beings would exceed one million, that the temperature of the planet would be close to that of earth, that it contains fruit-bearing trees, and so on. Yet there are many other aspects that we would think highly likely (even if, of course, one is not in a position to make any specific probability assignment). For instance, one would be surprised, I should think, to find that the lives of rational beings were Hobbesian – solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. On the contrary we would expect to find that the sentient inhabitants, rational and nonrational, have fulfilling and happy lives, that there would be no pointless suffering, and that there would not be evil on a grand scale (wars, famines, deadly epidemics, etc.). After all, we would expect a morally typical human being to want to make *our* world like this were she in a position to do so. And given the advantages of omnipotence and omniscience, we would think she would have a pretty good chance at succeeding.

Looked at this way, the problem of evil can be seen as part of a wider kind of difficulty for theism: the problem of defeated expectations (see Chapters 4 and 5). There are a number of empirically verified phenomena that would seem to be improbable on the assumption that God exists. Whether we are considering the problem of divine silence, the wide diversity of religious belief (much of which is inconsistent with other religious belief), and even the long, apparently inefficient means by which creation has been crafted, the problem is at root the same. If all we knew were the fundamental existence claim of theism, we would be surprised by these things.

The problem of evil gets particular attention among these problems of defeated expectations because the amount, kind, and distribution of evil we find is more jarring, and apparently more alien to the fundamental claim of theism, than is the relative divine silence, diversity of religious belief, and method of creation. Looking at the problem as one of defeated expectations has the advantage of explaining why the evidential problem of evil is generally thought to be so much worse than the logical problem of evil. For the existence of *some* evil would not be particularly surprising given theism. We would not be surprised to find that a world of free, rational creatures contained some pain and suffering for the purposes of soul-making (see Chapter 14); we would not be surprised to find out that any robust, law-governed natural world will come with dangers (perhaps for soul-making purposes or maybe just of metaphysical necessity) and that the rational creatures in such a world are equipped with danger-detectors that work by producing pain; finally, we would not be surprised to find that free creatures are punished for their misdeeds in proportion to their culpability for the purpose of remediation. The claim of J.L. Mackie notwithstanding (see Chapter 2), we have no particular reason to expect that a world that included God would be entirely free of evil.

The problem of evil is a serious difficulty for the theist, then, not because it is surprising that the world contains evil, but because of the amount, kind, and distribution of evil that we find here. That is, the bare existence of evil might not be terribly unexpected but it is surprising is how much there is, how bad it is, and (often anyway) who feels the brunt of it. Furthermore, there are two very different kinds of cases that seem particularly problematic. First, there is severe suffering and untimely death – caused either by natural disasters or by bad human choices – for which some potential divine reason is conceivable but which seems too great for the candidate reason to justify. Second, there are instances of intense suffering that are apparently simply gratuitous – that is, they seem to us to be completely pointless. The second kind of cases is those for which there is not even a candidate explanation – there seems to simply be no purpose served in allowing it.

Let us take these problematic cases in order. Punishing a person for her culpable wrongdoing for the purpose of remediation is not apparently inconsistent with being omnibenevolent or even with having a perfect love for that person. Allowing World War II, in which 70 million people were killed – including approximately 40 million civilians, many of whom met slow, excruciating deaths – when one could have prevented it is another matter. Let us pause for a moment to think about the three dimensions along which World War II thwarts the expectations of theism. First, given that 70 million people lost their lives prematurely, the amount of evil unleashed is mind-boggling. But more than the unfathomable volume of evil that these deaths represent, there are the unspeakable circumstances in which so many died. Whether it was the Nazi death camps, the carpet bombing of European cities, the slow agonizing starvation of St. Petersburg, or the grotesque and dehumanizing Japanese experimentation on the Chinese and Koreans, the physical and psychological suffering was not only widespread but extremely deep. So there was a *great deal* of *very bad evil and suffering*. Worse still, the distribution of the pain and suffering fell primarily on those who had nothing to do with mass infliction of the evil perpetrated. As previously mentioned, approximately 40 million of the dead were civilians, and a significant percentage of them were children. Unlike millions who suffered greatly for years before succumbing to agonizing deaths, Adolf Hitler was never subjected to punishment and died quickly by his own hand. Generally speaking, many of those most deserving of great pain were spared it; those least deserving were often those who suffered most.

There are potential explanations of evil that come to mind and that have had long histories in discussions of the problem of evil: that giving people significant free will means putting up with the odious consequences of repugnant choices or that in the midst of great suffering one finds acts of heroism, sacrifice, and selflessness that would not happen in good times, and so on (see Chapter 14). While there is perhaps something to these candidate explanations, the response to them is obvious: the benefit either could have been had for less or is not worth the cost.

The second type of case that defeats the expectations of theism is the individual but severe instances of pain and suffering that apparently serve no purpose at all. In the contemporary literature, William Rowe's case of the suffering fawn best exemplifies this objection (Rowe 1979) (see Chapter 4). Rowe has us imagine a forest fire in which a fawn is badly burned and survives in excruciating pain for several days before dying. We can add to this example that no one observes the fawn; it suffers and dies in complete isolation – unseen or otherwise detected by anyone. Notice that in this kind of case the usual potential reasons why God allows evil are not available. The fawn's suffering is not the result of anyone's action, so a free will defense is out. Furthermore, there is no possibility for soul-making for a nonrational being that has no future. And since no one knows about the painful death of this particular fawn, there is no observer soul-making justification available either.

It is remarkable how two such different examples (i.e., the massive human death and suffering of World War II and the painful, slow demise of a single fawn) can constitute instances of the same general problem for theism: that of squaring what one would reasonably expect to find in a world governed by an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being with some of what one finds here. For sake of reference, let us refer to large scale horrendous evils for which our explanations of potential divine reasons are apparently swamped (e.g., World War II) as "horrors" and evils about which we are completely stymied as to what possible reason God could have for allowing them "clueless evils."

Fundamentally, there are two ways a theist can respond to problems of defeated expectations. She can offer auxiliary hypotheses that, when taken with the central claim of theism, make what we find here expected. This is the avenue Alvin Plantinga takes in his important work on the logical problem of evil (Plantinga 1974, chapter IX) (see Chapter 2). Indeed, he wants to offer auxiliary hypotheses that, when combined with the claims of theism, not only leads us to expect to find evil, but actually entails that it exists.<sup>1</sup> Of course, this first strategy does not require that the added claims, together with theism, entail the sort of evil we find but only that they make roughly the amount, kind, and distribution of evil in our world expected.

Less ambitiously, one might attempt to argue only that what we find here is *not unexpected* given theism and the added hypotheses. This second way of replying itself can be divided into two alternative strategies. First, one might argue that theism and the hypotheses make the likelihood that our world would contain the evil we find about 50/50. For example, if I know that there are 50 red gumballs and 50 green gumballs in an opaque dispenser, I will neither expect the next gumball to be red nor expect it to be green because I know the odds are even for each; it is because I know the probabilities that I have no

1 Plantinga is concerned with the logical problem of evil rather than evidential problem in the section of the cited work I am alluding to; so what is entailed is not the evil that we find here but only the bare existence of evil.

expectations. Alternatively, the theist might argue that we are completely in the dark about the likelihood of the world's containing the evil we find. Going back to the gumball example, this would be akin to being asked what color gumball to expect when one has no idea what color or colors of gumballs are in the dispenser. Here, one has no expectations not because one knows that the odds of getting a gumball of a particular color are only 50% but rather because one is entirely clueless about the odds.

In this chapter, we will be looking at a response to the evidential problem of evil that takes this last approach. Skeptical theism is the position that once one understands the nature of God and the nature of humanity, one will see that the perspective of humans concerning the likelihood of a theistic world's containing horrors and clueless evils is similar to the perspective of the gumball receiver in the second case. Because the literature is large, we will focus on one particular approach to skeptical theism that attempts to explain away the epistemic significance of horrors and clueless evils by appeal to a particular epistemological principle. In the end, I will offer a limited defense of this approach against a couple of important criticisms. We begin by looking a bit more carefully at what skeptical theism is and the principle in question.

## Skeptical Theism

The fundamental insight at the core of skeptical theism is as old as theism itself. For example, when Job, lamenting his devastating losses, questions the goodness of God, God speaks to him out of a whirlwind (see Chapter 26).

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man. I will question you and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! (Job 38:1–5, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV))

God goes on like this for quite a while, asking a long series of rhetorical questions that show the puniness of humanity in contrast with the greatness of the divine. Isaiah echoes the same theme, reporting God as saying,

For my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are my ways your ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8–9, NRSV)

Skeptical theism takes this grand divide between divine and human understanding and applies it to the problem of horrors and clueless evils. The aim, at least on my telling of it, is to argue that a deep and well-articulated understanding of what theism says about God and humanity should remove whatever expectations we might have antecedently had about whether a world created and tended to by God would include horrors and clueless evils.

As I noted earlier, there various ways one might attempt to mine the primary insight of skeptical theism into a response to the evidential problem of evil. In this section, we will be setting our sights primarily on a particular epistemic principle that, if true and appropriately applied in the case of horrors and clueless evils, would entail that the move from “apparently no adequate explanation for evil E” to “probably, there is no adequate explanation

for E" is not warranted. Before we do that though, I want to have a brief look at a slightly different way of defending the skeptical theist's position.

In his important article, "The Inductive Argument from Evil" (Alston 1991), William P. Alston discusses six human cognitive limitations that make our inability to know what explanation God would have for allowing evils not unexpected.

- (1) *Lack of Data*: We are limited in what we know about the constitution and structure of the universe, the remote past and future (including whatever afterlife there may be), and the secrets of the human heart.
- (2) *Complexity Greater than We Can Handle*: We are limited in our ability to hold the enormously complex facts about what we know about differences in possible worlds and systems of natural law in our minds in such a way as to allow for confidence in our comparative evaluations.
- (3) *Difficulty of Determining What Is Metaphysically Possible or Necessary*: We are limited in our knowledge of what is metaphysically (as opposed to conceptually) possible. Particularly if theism is true, what is conceptually possible and what is metaphysically possible come to very different things.
- (4) *Ignorance of the Full Range of Possibilities*: We are limited not only in our ability to be sure what is possible but even in our ability to conceive of what all the possibilities might be.
- (5) *Ignorance of the Full Range of Values*: We are limited in what know of what is of value and what kinds of values there might be.
- (6) *Limits to Our Capacity to Make Well-Considered Value Judgments*: We are limited in our ability compare the total value of various worlds or complex situations.

Similarly, Michael Bergmann has argued that skeptical theism can be understood via these three hypotheses:

- ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
- ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
- ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

(Bergmann 2001)

There is a lot to be said for arguing for skeptical theism along Alston/Bergmann lines. Whether or not it proves sufficient as a rebuttal to the challenge of the evidential problem of evil, it surely does something to diminish the expectation that humans would be able to offer a plausible explanation for why God allows any particular instance of evil were the world to be fundamentally like theists think it is (i.e., one that includes God and human beings). Nevertheless, the perspective to which we shall now turn our attention has an additional advantage: it is grounded in a very general epistemic principle that has a great deal of initial plausibility in contexts that have nothing to do with theism and evil – or even with fundamental philosophical notions like necessity and possibility. In fact, I would go as far as to say that even if there are difficulties with any particular specification of the



principle, it is pretty clear that something in the ballpark is right. So if the skeptical theist can make her case via a general epistemic principle clearly applied to our situation regarding horrors and clueless evils, she stands a better chance of offering a reply to the evidential problem of evil that will be generally recognized as successful. Whether she can pull that off is controversial and is the matter to which we will now turn out attention.

## CORNEA

Contemporary skeptical theism begins with an important article by Stephen Wykstra (Wykstra 1984). The particular version of the empirical problem of evil that Wykstra has in his sights here is that of William Rowe (see Chapter 4), who argues as follows:

- (1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient wholly good being.

Rowe offers his famous fawn case as a prime example of the kind of evils the first premise claims exist. The theist will have to grant that the suffering of the fawn could have been prevented by God; that much is clear. It also seems undeniable that animals sometimes suffer slow, painful deaths from purely natural causes. The key point, of course, is the apparent gratuitousness of this suffering. While he does not spend much time explaining precisely what the justification is for believing that the evil is gratuitous, it is not unfair to take Rowe's argument to be what Wykstra claims it is: an argument from the way things appear to the way things are.

In particular, Wykstra refers to arguments of the sort Rowe gives as "noseeum arguments." That is, if you look for something and you cannot see it, then you should conclude that it is not there. Try as we might, we can think of no sufficient justifying good that the fawn's suffering serves. Note that in order to be sufficiently justifying, the good would have to be such that it (or an equivalent good) could not have been achieved by an omnipotent being through less painful (or otherwise bad) means and is sufficiently good to outweigh the suffering of the fawn.<sup>2</sup> So it is not enough to think of some good or other the suffering could serve – it must be a good for which the suffering is necessary and which outweighs (one should think substantially) the suffering. So our problem is really twofold: in order to be a sufficiently outweighing good, the suffering has to be necessary for it and the good must be significant enough to outweigh the suffering – and it is hard to a potential good that meets these conditions. But worse still, it is hard to think of any good *at all* (even one that is outweighed) that comes from this suffering.

<sup>2</sup> As is regularly noted, a justifying reason might also be the prevention of evils that could not have been prevented without allowing the suffering in question (or something equally as bad).

From our utter cluelessness as to what could possibly justify the suffering, Rowe infers that it appears that there is no such justifying reason. But given a standard principle of credulity that says, "If it appears to S that P, then (other things being equal) S is rational to believe P," one can then rationally conclude that there is no justifying reason for the fawn's suffering.

Now Rowe is clear that he does not take any of this as a *demonstration* of the gratuitousness of the fawn's suffering. But he thinks our cluelessness gives the appearance that there is not one. And that appearance together with the credulity principle implies that belief in the gratuitousness of the suffering is rational.

Before we launch into a discussion of Wykstra's reply, I want to note a couple points about Rowe's evidential argument from evil. First, while Rowe does say something about why the theist is committed to the argument's second premise and this premise has generally been granted by theists, it can be, and has been, objected to (van Inwagen 2006). However, since this chapter is about skeptical theism, I will have nothing more to say about premise 2. Second, Rowe's argument for premise 1, even if granted, would seem to be weaker than what he needs. For Rowe argues that the appearance of there being no justifying reason is sufficient for it being rational to believe the first premise. But a belief's being rational is, on Rowe's view, nothing other than its being reasonable (for he uses the terms interchangeably). Yet like justification, reasonability is generally regarded as a permissibility term. His argument, then, apparently is for the rational acceptability of the first premise. But since the argument is intended not merely to provide rational support for atheism but is rather supposed to change the mind of the theist (or at very least provide a defeater for whatever justification she may have for believing in theism), it is not enough that Rowe make the case for the rational acceptability of the first premise. He must argue that it is rationally obligatory – that rejecting it or even withholding it is rationally unacceptable.

In a footnote in Rowe (1979), Rowe recognizes that the theist might argue that even if it is more rational to accept the first premise than to accept its negation, the most rational position to take would be to withhold it. His reply is that given (i) the amount and intensity of suffering in the world, (ii) the fact that much of this suffering is apparently unrelated to greater goods, and (iii) that when there are such goods, they are not intimately tied to the suffering in a way as to make it plausible that an omnipotent being could not have achieved them without the suffering, it is more rational to accept the first premise than it is to withhold it. So Rowe is, in fact, committed to the claim that not only is step 1 of the evidential argument from evil rationally justified – it is rationally obligatory in the absence of either responses to (i)–(iii) or strong independent evidence of the existence of God.

We are, at last, in a position to see Wykstra's response to Rowe's justification of premise 1. We have seen that there is at least a tacit appeal on Rowe's behalf to a principle of credulity: if it appears to S that P, then S is *prima facie* rational in believing P. Yet while there are obviously cases in which appearances support rational belief, this is not always so. Even when the appearance and the belief it produces have the same content, sometimes the belief formed is not rational. Suppose that it is late at night and I am planning to take a walk in the neighborhood of the hotel in which I am staying. It occurs to me to wonder if I should take a flashlight and so I look out from my window to see if the sidewalk in the area of the hotel is well-lit. I look out and am surprised to see no streetlights on except for what is in the hotel parking lot. This leads me to form the belief that there are no streetlights on except for what is in the parking lot. Here, it seems, the fact that it appears to me that P is good reason to believe that P. The principle of credulity has a confirming instance.

Suppose also, looking out that same window in the same circumstances, I wonder if there are any muggers along the path I plan to walk. I look out and can see very little in the darkness; prospective muggers are among the things I cannot see. That is, there are no apparent muggers – that is, apparently there are no muggers. But if I were to apply the principle of credulity and believe that there are no muggers, I would obviously be making a mistake. So why am I justified in my belief about the dearth of streetlamps but not (even *prima facie*) justified in my belief that there are no muggers in the area? Wykstra's reply is this: in the first case, it is reasonable for me to believe that if my belief that there are no streetlights near the hotel were false, it would make a difference in the way things appear to me. For if it were false that there are no lights, then there would be lights and (with it being now nighttime) those lights would be on. And if they were on and I was to look out my window, I would see them. And so my looking and not seeing lights is good reason to believe that there are no streetlights on the streets near my hotel. On the other hand, suppose my belief that there are no muggers near the hotel is false – and that indeed there are muggers lurking in the night. Would that make a difference as to how things appear to me? Almost certainly not. Because the night is dark and the path not illuminated, even if there were muggers there, I would likely not see them. I would still see only darkness.

Here, then, is Wykstra's official statement of the principle he labels "CORNEA" (the "Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access"):

On the basis of cognized situation *s*, human *H* is entitled to claim "It appears that *P*" only if it is reasonable for *H* to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if *p* were not the case, *s* would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.<sup>3</sup> (Wykstra 1984)

Notice that according to CORNEA, "appears" is to be understood as having a decidedly epistemic bent; that is, it is not simply a matter of what one experiences that determines what appears to one. So in the hotel case, CORNEA will imply that while it does appear to me that there are no streetlamps on, it does not appear to me that there are no muggers in the area. That might sound all right, but other applications of CORNEA will not conform as smoothly with the way we speak. For example, if there is a wall in front of me that I know to be illuminated with blue light, then even if the wall *looks* blue to me (i.e., I experience the wall the way I experience blue things), it would not be the case that it *appears* blue to me as long as I know about the lighting (because I will reasonably believe that even if the wall is not blue, it will look blue in these circumstances). I am not suggesting that CORNEA is faulty for not according with ordinary language; whether "appears" is being used in the ordinary sense is philosophically irrelevant. But it is helpful to note this for the purpose of avoiding confusion. CORNEA does not alter the principle of credulity but instead puts restrictions on when the antecedent ("It appears that *P*") holds.

3 There are some oddities about the formulation of CORNEA that would not detail us here but which I cannot resist noting. First, why limit this principle to humans? I understand that use Wykstra wants to make of it in reply to Rowe requires only its application to humans, but the motivation for it has nothing to do with our being the species we are but only of our being rational beings. Second, the principle tells us when it is all right to *claim* that "It appears that *P*" but surely it should be a principle about belief.

## Objections to CORNEA: Closure and Induction

There are a number of objections that have been raised against CORNEA. We shall discuss two. Andrew Graham and Stephen Maitzen have argued that CORNEA appears to violate the principle of closure under known entailment (Graham and Maitzen 2007). For consider the following claim: “I am not a brain-in-a-vat currently being deceived to think that I am embodied and seated in a chair.” CORNEA tells us that I am entitled to believe that this *appears to me* only if it is the case that were the claim false, there would be a detectable difference in my experience. But of course the whole reason Cartesian-style skepticism is so vexing is that were I so deceived, I would have no way of knowing it. So CORNEA implies that it does not appear to me that I’m not a brain-in-a-vat. Now, unless the CORNEA proponent is willing to embrace skepticism about the external world, she will want to insist that I can know that I’m seated in a chair – and presumably I know this because of the way things appear to me. Notice that “I’m seated in a chair” passes CORNEA’s test for appearing: if I were not currently seated, in the closest possible worlds, my experience would be different. But if I can know that, and if I can see that “If I am seated in a chair  $\rightarrow$  I am not a brain-in-a-vat currently being deceived to think that I am embodied and seated in a chair,” then given the closure principle, I can know that I am not a brain-in-a-vat currently being deceived to think that I am embodied and seated in a chair. Yet we have seen that this final claim is unjustified given CORNEA.

Yet the relationship between CORNEA and closure is not as clear as the argument suggests. For standard versions of closure principles are couched in terms of knowledge (or justified belief) and commit one to the following: if I know that  $p$ , and I know that  $p \rightarrow q$ , then I know that  $q$  (or I can come to know that  $q$  by reflecting on the antecedent of this conditional). Precisely how to map this on to talk about appearances is by no means obvious. In a response to this objection, Wykstra claims that he is committed only to the lack of evidential authority that experience has for denials of envattedness; that is, for example, my experience of sitting can play no evidential role – can provide no justificatory boost – for my belief that I am not a brain in a vat. That is what CORNEA requires. However, it might be that my experience of sitting can justify me in my belief that I am sitting only if I am antecedently justified in believing I am not a brain in a vat. And if that were the case, Wykstra claims, then both principles could be honored. The point, Wykstra insists, is that closure “does not say what *makes* you justified” (Wykstra 2007) and in particular, it does not say that my current experience of sitting must play a justificatory role in my belief that I am not a brain in a vat. So the CORNEA proponent can accept the principle of closure.

Whether Wykstra’s response works is unclear. For since my experience that I am sitting clearly can play a key justificatory role for my belief that I am sitting, and since my sitting entails that I am not envatted and I can see that, it would seem to follow that my experience does in fact play a key justificatory role in my belief that I am not envatted (at least if the closure principle is right). Yet the fact that CORNEA may run afoul of closure is not necessarily a reason to throw it out. For it is very hard to know what to say about the closure principle and its implication that we can know we are not brains in vats if we have any perceptual knowledge. All positions have unwelcomed consequences.

The second objection to CORNEA that we will discuss, and which I take to be a potentially much more serious problem, is Justin P. McBrayer’s argument that it entails a vast

inductive skepticism (McBrayer 2009). McBrayer points out that core idea behind CORNEA is very much along the lines of what has come to be called a “sensitivity” condition in epistemology. But whereas standard sensitivity conditions concern belief, CORNEA concerns appearances, or more generally evidence.<sup>4</sup> That is, a sensitivity condition for S’s knowing that *p* is the condition that if *P* were false, then S would not believe that *P*. The idea is that knowledge implies that the subject be sensitive to the truth value of the proposition believed, and one aspect of this is that the subject would not believe what she does if it were not true.

CORNEA puts a similar condition on what can count as an epistemically significant appearance. *E* can count as evidence for *P* for subject *S* only if the following counterfactual is true: if *P* were false, then *S*’s epistemic situation would be different than it is. Put slightly differently, if *S*’s belief were false, *S* would not have *E* – or if *S* had *E*, *S* would also have other evidence that indicates that *E* is misleading.

McBrayer’s argument against CORNEA comes via three distinct examples that all share this feature: the subject clearly possesses solid inductive evidence yet fails the counterfactual test. Since each example has the same basic structure, it will be enough for us to look at just one of the three cases. Suppose Justin is at the office and he believes that his son Patrick is asleep at home. This belief is grounded in the following inductive evidence: it is now 3 p.m. and Patrick almost always naps from 2 to 4 p.m. In fact, if needed, we could claim that Patrick has not missed his 2–4 p.m. nap in a year and Justin knows that. Finally, let us add that Justin has no reason to think that Patrick’s schedule will be different today. Surely, Justin has quite strong inductive evidence that Patrick is asleep. However, the relevant CORNEA counterfactual is false: it is not the case that if Patrick were not asleep, then Justin’s epistemic situation would be different from what it currently is. Presumably, the closest worlds at which Patrick is not napping are worlds in which “he ate spicy food for lunch or perhaps [Justin’s] wife took him out on a last minute errand or perhaps he’s just not sleepy” (McBrayer 2009, 83). And in none of these worlds would Justin’s cognitive situation – that is, the evidence he has for his belief – be any different than it is now. Therefore, Justin’s belief fails to satisfy CORNEA even though he has very solid inductive evidence for his belief. So CORNEA is not a legitimate constraint on evidence.

McBrayer notes that inductive inference is very often insensitive to the falsity of the target belief. That is, having good inductive evidence for *P* is in many cases consistent with its not being the case that were *P* false, one’s evidence would be other than it is. Notice that it is not only evidence that misrepresents the total available evidence that fails the CORNEA test; even the strongest inductive evidence may be insensitive. Lottery cases demonstrates this well: in a large lottery, the evidence that my ticket will lose is very, very strong, and yet for all that it is not sensitive to the truth.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the clarity of the case (and the two other cases McBrayer offers), the matter with CORNEA is by no means settled. First, as McBrayer notes, one might object that in recent papers, Wykstra has claimed that CORNEA is to be understood not as a constraint on evidence *simpliciter* but rather on “levering evidence” – that is, evidence sufficient for one to revise one’s belief from what it was before one had the evidence (or what it would be in the absence of the evidence). With this in mind, let us think again about the napping

4 McBrayer notes that in Wykstra (2007), Wykstra says that CORNEA can be taken as a restriction on whether evidence “seriously ‘supports’ . . . some hypotheses *H*” (Wykstra 2007, 88).

5 One of McBrayer’s three counterexamples involves a lottery case.

case. Suppose that Patrick *usually* naps from 2 to 4 (maybe 75% of the time) but with some frequency does not. In this case, although Justin has decent inductive evidence that supports his belief, it is not at all clear that he is justified in believing that Patrick is asleep rather than withholding or, alternatively, believing that it is somewhat likely that Patrick is asleep. On the first alternative, the evidence is not leveraging; on the second, it is leveraging, but it also is not clear at all that Justin fails CORNEA. For being the involved father that he is, if it were false that it is somewhat likely that Patrick is asleep, Justin's cognitive situation would be different: if his son did not usually nap from 2 to 4, then he would not have the background knowledge he actually has regarding Patrick's sleeping habits.

Suppose we amp up the evidence, though, and say that for the last year Patrick has napped literally *everyday* from 2 to 4. Now we have leveraging evidence that he is napping today at 3 p.m., but it is not clear that CORNEA fails. For in such a case, what are the nearest worlds at which Patrick does not nap? Well, they are worlds at which something quite unusual happens. Maybe it was unavoidable that a doctor's appointment was scheduled for 3 p.m. or maybe there was an accident or some other reason that Patrick's mother had to leave the house with Patrick during naptime. But in many of these circumstances, Justin would likely be aware of these exceptional circumstances. CORNEA does not require that Justin's epistemic situation would *certainly* be different than it is, but only that it is *likely* that it would. So when we make the evidence of Patrick's napping strong enough to make it clear that Justin has leveraging evidence for his belief, the likelihood that he would know if the belief were false increases substantially. And with that increase, the chance that CORNEA gets satisfied increases, too.<sup>6</sup>

The objections raise problems for McBrayer's argument, but it might well be that they can be successfully rebutted. There is, though, a more important objection that McBrayer anticipates, but fails to develop, at the end of his paper. Recall that Wykstra introduces CORNEA as constraint on what counts as an appearance. As McBrayer states and I noted earlier, this means that "It appears to S that P" is epistemically loaded; it is not merely a statement about the way things *seem* to S but rather how they seem when S is appropriately P-sensitive. McBrayer quotes Wykstra as saying that the structure of the evidential argument from evil as one finds it in the work of Rowe is this:

- A. We see no good for which God would allow e.
- B. There appears to be no good for which God allows e.
- C. There is no good for which God allows e.

(Wykstra 1996, 127)

McBrayer notes that as formulated, CORNEA blocks the move from A to B. However, given that "appears" is often used in a nonepistemic sense, McBrayer suggests that we understand the term in this latter way. So understood, the controversial move is now from B to C: the fact that there appears to be no good for which God allows e does not justify the inference that there is no good. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

<sup>6</sup> I do not have the space here to discuss McBrayer's two other examples. One is a lottery case and I will grant that what I say about the case does not translate there. But lottery cases cause so much trouble for virtually every epistemological theory that I am disinclined to throw out a theory because it has trouble with them. In the third case, I have seen lots of crows, all of which are black, and this gives me good evidence that all crows are black. I believe that this case is subject to criticisms similar to those I offer to the napping case.



While there is nothing infelicitous in this move *per se*, I believe it encourages one to think of CORNEA as not so much a constraint on appearances but rather on evidence in general. Indeed, it is clear that McBrayer takes it as such (otherwise his counterexamples would not work) and he quotes a line from Wykstra that seems to suggest this.<sup>7</sup> Now in the final two pages of his paper, McBrayer notes that CORNEA is a plausible principle when *perceptual* appears claims are at issue. For example, my looking quickly in my garage and seeing my wife's car there gives me good evidence that my wife's car is in the garage because I have good reason to believe that if it were not there and I looked, my cognitive situation would be different. Alternatively, if a quick look fails to produce the appearance of my wife's car, I have good evidence that it is not there because I know that if it were there I would see it. On the other hand, if a quick look in my garage fails to produce a visual appearance of a lost earring, I do not thereby have good evidence that the earring is not in the garage because it is likely that even if it were there, the garage would still look the same to me (given that I gave it only a quick glance). So perhaps the move for Wykstra to make here is to claim that in fact CORNEA is not a general condition of adequacy for inductive evidence, but rather is only in effect when the appearance is perceptual.

The difficulty with this move in the context of the evidential problem of evil is obvious: there is no perceptual appearance involved. While it will be granted by the skeptical theist that there is apparently no justification for various evils, "apparently" is not to be understood in its perceptual sense. There is not a perceptual appearance of "no justification for the evil" – nothing one sees, hears, smells, tastes, or feels could count as that. So an appeal to literal perceptual appearances would not help the skeptical theist here. And note that the problem is not just that there is no such thing as a negative perceptual appearance. For even though negative appearances are typically not as robust or straightforward as positive appearances, we can certainly make sense of the idea. When I look in the garage and do not see a car, the garage appears to contain no car. But still, the appearance of a lack of justification for evil is not perceptual even in this negative sense.

So is there any good sense in which it does appear that there is no justification for the evil? Yes, there is. Let us pull back a bit from a simple perceptual approach to appearances and think about what this can mean in other circumstances. That is, under what nonperceptual circumstances do we think that it can appear that *P* or that  $\neg P$ ? Suppose you are given a problem in basic sentential logic: you are to see if you can derive a given sentence from a pair of other sentences using a certain few inferential rules. Being experienced but no expert in such matters, you spend the better part of an hour trying everything you can think of, and in the end, you see how it can be done, although the proof involves many more steps than any other proof you have ever worked. Here, it appears to you that the conclusion follows from the premises. On the other hand, suppose that after an hour you have tried everything you can think of and cannot see how to derive the target sentence. In this case, it appears to you that there is no solution to the problem (even if you cannot be sure you are right).

One aspect of these cases that supports the appearance talk even though nothing perceptual is going on is precisely the fact that CORNEA – or something like it<sup>8</sup> – applies here: if I am very bad at natural deduction and often mistakenly think I have done a proof correctly

7 See Note 4 for the quotation and reference.

8 Because this case involves necessary truths/falsehoods, the relevant counterfactual cannot involve the falsity of the target belief.



when I have not, then the fact that it appears to me that the argument is valid is not a good reason to think it is; similarly, if I am often stumped by even simple problems, the fact that it appears to me that there is no way to derive the target sentence is not good reason to think there is no available derivation.

Here is another case. I am watching a chess match between two very good players, Katie and Elisa. Early in the game, Katie makes a move that allows Elisa to capture one of her bishops. I have watched Katie and Elisa play chess many times, and I have not seen this happen before. I wonder if maybe Katie just made an uncharacteristic, silly mistake or if she has learned a new move and believes that the capture of her bishop is required by this move in order to ultimately put her in a better position to win the game. I think for a few minutes, looking intently at the board as I do, and I can see no good strategy that is served by losing a bishop so early. That is, it appears to me that there is no good reason. What this means here, I think, is that having looked at the board and searched my mind for potential explanations, I can see no winning strategy that is served by this gambit. The appearance of there being no good reason for Katie's move will give me good reason to believe that there is not one on the assumption that, if there were such a reason, I would probably be able to think of it.

Notice that each of these nonperceptual appearance cases, there is not anything that looks much like induction or abduction (let alone deduction). It is not that I am drawing an inference based on past experiences of Katie's making inexplicable moves that I later learned were simple mistakes. Of course, there might be cases where this happens but that is not the case as I have described it. Here, let us suppose, I have never seen Katie make such an apparently inexplicable move before and I am trying to find a justifying reason for it. Abduction is perhaps more in keeping with this example, but if it is abduction, it is a limiting case. For the fact is that I can think of no other candidate explanation other than simple error. I am not weighing that hypothesis against any other – rather I am forced to that conclusion by the fact that I can think of no other possibilities – that is, by its appearing to me that there is no good reason she could have for making the move she made.

Finally, I want to be clear that I am not claiming that anytime one is inclined to think that *P* or believes that *P*, it *appears* to one as *P* in the relevant sense. For in both the perceptual and nonperceptual cases of appearing that we have looked at there is something in the way one is experiencing the situation that could reasonably be called an appearance that goes beyond a mere inclination to believe or a belief. Positive perceptual cases are clear enough but even negative perceptual cases fit the bill: one is having a perceptual state that fails to include the item in question (whether that gives one a good reason to form the relevant belief, we have seen, depends on other factors). In the nonperceptual cases, it is also natural to say that it appearances are playing a role that is more than a mere inclination to believe: the appearance of validity and clear reason for acting in the positive cases, and the lack of such appearances in the negative cases. Perhaps we should think of these as merely honorific types of appearances, but not all inclinations to believe are deserving of this appellation.<sup>9</sup>

All of this is clearly relevant to the use of CORNEA (or something like it) as a response to the evidential problem of evil. For even if McBrayer is right that CORNEA cannot be a general condition of evidential support (and he surely is right about this), it may still be a condition of positive epistemic support on appearances. The question then is whether

9 Much more will be said about these issues presently.

the case one's inability to see potential God-justifying reasons for horrors and clueless evils is appropriately considered to be a negative appearance of the nonexistence of a reason. Keep in mind that we have followed McBrayer in understanding appearance here in a nonepistemic sense – that is, it does not follow from “It appears to S that P” that S has a good reason to believe that P. In order for the appearance to give S a good reason, a CORNEA like principle will have to hold.

Before we leave the role of CORNEA in the skeptical theist's response to the evidential problem of evil, I want to raise one other issue. In its various incarnations, CORNEA requires that in order for an appearance to provide a subject with a good reason to believe the relevant proposition, the subject must be in a position to reasonably believe that if there were a reason, then her epistemic situation would be different. As such, it puts a strong internalistic condition on when an appearance can justify a belief. But there is good reason to think that such a restriction is too strong. Being able to understand the proposition that CORNEA requires be justified for one involves having the concept of “epistemic situation” and that one must be able to engage in nontrivial counterfactual thinking. One must be capable of understanding this proposition: *if the target belief were false, then one would have reasons one currently lacks or lack reasons that one currently has that would alter what one is justified in believing*. Furthermore, this counterfactual epistemic claim must be justified for one if the appearance in question is to be evidentially significant.

Yet there is good reason for thinking that such a restriction is both too strong and unnecessary, and for reasons that will be familiar to anyone with even a passing interest in the internalism/externalism debate in epistemology. An average five-year-old will have a good reason to believe there is no car in the garage when she looks into the garage and sees that it is empty. Similarly, if a quick look does not reveal her mother's earring, she will not thereby have good reason to think the earring is not in the garage. What matters here is not that she have the relevant background belief that CORNEA requires but only that the relevant counterfactual *be true*. That is, the garage's appearing carless is good reason for thinking the car is not in the garage because were it to contain a car, it would not be the case that the garage would appear carless. But there being no apparent earring in the garage is not good reason to think there is no earring there because were an earring in there, the garage would appear just as it does.

I am not naïve enough to suppose that the case I have just made will convince the internalist; nevertheless, I find cases like this compelling. And if one adopts an externalistic safety-type condition rather than the internalistic CORNEA alternative, there is a potential payoff for the skeptical theist. It would not matter what *the average person justifiably believes* about whether we would be able to come up with a plausible explanation if there were one; instead, what matters is just what the truth is. So we can hash out the merits of skeptical theism in graduate seminars and journals, but as long as a suitably strong version of skeptical theism is *true*, then the person in the pew will be reasonable in rejecting the first premise if it is grounded (as it typically is) on our inability to conjure candidate explanations of the evils in question, regardless of her conceptual or epistemological sophistication.

## Skeptical Theism and Common-Sense Epistemology

We will now consider one more objection to skeptical theism. While this charge is not aimed particularly at a CORNEA-type principle, it is relevant to our discussion because it

is an objection grounded in the epistemic import of appearances. Trent Dougherty (Dougherty 2008, 2011) has argued that skeptical theism does not play well with what he dubs “common sense epistemology” (let us call the particular version of this view favored by Dougherty “CSE”). While he does not argue for CSE, he clearly is favorably disposed to it. And while he admits to thinking there is “something clearly right in skeptical theism” (Dougherty 2008, 175) from what he can tell the considerations adduced by the skeptical theist are insufficient to overcome the *prima facie* justification that the appearance of no explanation generates for the claim that such evils have no explanation. I will argue that the varieties of common sense epistemology that are plausible are in fact perfectly consistent with the skeptical theist claim.

I begin with two caveats. First, the issues I’m about to address require much more space if they are to be fully aired. What I will take myself to have done is only to have fired the first shots at the variety of common sense epistemology that Dougherty favors. Second, in claiming that I will argue for the consistency of skeptical theism and the varieties of common sense epistemology that are “plausible,” I could be accused of a bait and switch because it will turn out that CSE is not one of the plausible varieties. Yet my intentions are friendly: by making his epistemology more plausible, Dougherty can then embrace what is clearly right in skeptical theism.

We have actually already been introduced to something very much like the CSE, namely, the principle of credulity. Recall that this is the claim that “If it appears to S that P, then (other things being equal) it is rational for S to believe that P.” Dougherty’s principle is similar, yet importantly different. CSE (which Dougherty also calls “Reasons Commonsensism”) is this: If it seems to S that p, then S thereby has a *pro tanto* reason to believe p (Dougherty 2011, 333). A *pro tanto* reason is a reason that is a positive reason to believe a proposition, but one that can be outweighed by other reasons. Furthermore, Dougherty thinks that the stronger the seeming, the better the reason so that a very strong seeming will take considerably more to outweigh it than would a mild seeming.

The principle of credulity differs from CSE in that the former (at least as I am understanding it) has a more limited domain than the latter. As I argued earlier, while canonical appearances are perceptual, there are other varieties of appearances that are harder to characterize and likely less epistemically weighty, but still deserve the title if only in an honorific sense. But the credulity principle does not commit one to thinking that just any seeming is epistemically significant. According to CSE, an inclination to believe is a variety of seeming (Dougherty 2008, 174). So it is a consequence of CSE that if one has a strong inclination to believe that P, then one has a strong (although defeasible) reason to believe that P.

The tension between skeptical theism and CSE is easy to see. One considers (or better yet, experiences) a clueless evil and sees no hint of a justifying explanation God could have for allowing it. This produces in one a strong inclination to believe that there is no justifying explanation – the clueless evil is genuinely gratuitous. Now given CSE, this strong inclination is itself a very good reason to believe that it is true that the evil is gratuitous. Even though skeptical theism does provide some reason for not trusting appearances, given the forcefulness of the seeming, being reminded that we would not be in a position to know of a justifying explanation even if one existed will do little to take away the strong impression of gratuitousness. That is, the effect of the defeater will be minimal. Hence, we are left mostly where we started.

There are many points of reply I would like to make to all of this, but I will limit myself to challenging CSE. Again, I fully recognize that Dougherty is on record only as arguing

for the conditional claim that if CSE is right, then skeptical theism is not plausible. Taking him on directly would be to argue that the truth of the antecedent rests easily with the falsity of the consequent.<sup>10</sup> Yet Dougherty clearly is a fan of CSE (as are some other contemporary epistemologists) and hence his worry about its relationship with skeptical theism. Arguing that CSE is wrong is a way of defending skeptical theism.

I will begin by fully granting that we commonly take perceptual appearances to be very good reasons to believe. Yet even this can be overstated: as Descartes noted in the first Meditation, if we see something very small or very distant, we do not necessarily take that as a particularly strong justification. Even so, perceptual appearances of a certain kind are clearly generally taken to be strong justifying (*pro tanto*) reasons for the relevant beliefs.

Similarly, rational intuition and memory regularly provide us with appearances that are taken to justify. My belief that  $q$  follows from  $p$  and  $p \rightarrow q$  is thought to be justified because, on reflection I just cannot see how it could be otherwise; my belief that I am reasonable in believing I had chili for lunch because I have a clear memory impression is surely also common sense. Even my earlier discussed cases of my belief that a given sentence cannot be derived from a pair of other sentences or that Katie does not have a good reason for making her chess move are commonly taken to be justified because of appearances or the way things seem.

Yet as we have seen, CSE goes one step further and says that any seeming at all – any inclination to believe – is an epistemic reason to believe; and the stronger the seeming, the better the reason. But this does not mesh with common sense, at least if that is supposed to mean something like what people would typically think is implied by saying that a person has a good reason for something. Suppose you find out I think the Cubs will win the World Series in 2013. Curious, you ask me why I believe that, and I reply “I have a strong inclination to believe it; it just really seems true to me.” If what I reported pretty well exhausts my reasons, you would not be impressed. And it is not that you will think that my reason, though very strong, is outweighed by other reasons I have; you will think that my strong conviction is no good reason at all. Furthermore, suppose I have this strong conviction every year. Sure, I will have pretty good reason to think I am wrong when so many years go by without the Cubs winning, and so I might not be justified all things considered. But if CSE is right, that is just because my strong reason to believe is outweighed by my reason to think they would not win the elusive championship.

This surely is not common sense. But arguing that a philosophical theory is inappropriately named is not to lodge a serious complaint. Fortunately, a more significant objection is suggested earlier. The reason we think that a strong inclination to believe that the Cubs will win the Series in 2013 is no epistemic reason for that belief is that we do not think that there is any connection between having an inclination to believe that and the likelihood of that belief’s being true. Yet this is precisely why we think that appearances that are perceptual, mnemonic, or grounded in rational intuition are justification conferring.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of this point is hard to overstate. A significant part of our development as cognitive agents involves learning when it is a good idea to trust the way things seem to

10 Jonathan D. Matheson has taken on Dougherty’s argument directly in Matheson (2011). For the most part, I think Matheson’s points are right.

11 Note that nothing I am saying here depends on any kind of externalism; the point is one about the conditions under which we think appearances are epistemically weighty – and those conditions include *our thinking that* the appearances are indications of the (likely) truth of the relevant beliefs.

us and when it is not. Suppose I grow up in a racist environment and that produces in me the inclination to believe that people of a certain skin color are intrinsically evil. Once I become aware of my unwarranted racist attitudes, I learn that, regarding people of that race, my continued inclination to believe bad things about them is no reason to believe those bad things. It is not that it remains a good reason but just gets outweighed by other things I believe; no matter how strong that inclination continues to be, it provides me with no reason at all.

To cite one other, less important example, consider the gambler's fallacy. The more I lose, the better I think my chances are to win the next bet. Before I learn that this is fallacious, my strong inclination to believe perhaps makes my belief that my odds are now better reasonable (perhaps!). Yet once I come to understand the fallacy, I will not think that my inclination to believe in this context is any kind of epistemic reason to believe. Even if the inclination persists and is very strong, it just does not provide me with any reason at all to think my odds of winning are better if I have just lost several bets.

So a more plausible common sense epistemology would validate some kinds of appearances and seemings as providing *pro tanto* reasons, but would not throw the epistemic gates wide open and take in all comers. If this is right, then the relationship of plausible common sense epistemology and skeptical theism might well be friendly. For the appearance of gratuitousness in cases of clueless evils will not automatically bring with it serious epistemic weight, even if the appearance is forceful. Inasmuch as we have reason to believe that its seeming to us that clueless evils are gratuitous is a good indication that they are gratuitous, we will have reason to think the appearance is a good *pro tanto* reason. And of course, it is precisely here that the skeptical theist's arguments have their force. Given what God is like and what humans are like, she will say, we should not expect that there would be any serious connection between our being able to discern a potential justifying explanation for every evil and there being such an explanation. So we have at least some reason for thinking that the appearance of gratuitousness is more like the appearance that racists have than the appearance we get from standard cases of perception. It is not that the racist appearances are systematically associated with falsity but only that they provide no indication of the likely truth of the belief. And that is just what the skeptical theist will say about clueless evils.

## Conclusion

The problem of evil has the grip it has on us because our initial inclination to think that a world created and governed by God would be a world that lacked horrors and clueless evils. And particularly where horrors are concerned, this case of defeated expectations is stark and deeply troubling. The skeptical theist argues that in fact, we have no good reason to think that humans would be in a position to discern justifying explanations of these evils if they exist. So our being unable to discern them is not a good reason for thinking they are not there; that is, there being apparently no justifying explanation does not justify one in thinking there is no such explanation. We have spent most of the essay looking at one particular way of making the case for skeptical theism – one that depends on CORNEA and came away with a qualified defense of that line. Finally, I have argued that so-called common sense epistemology fits uneasily with skeptical theism, but that plausible versions of the theory mesh quite well with the skeptical theist's program.

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# The Moral Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism

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## The Evidential Argument from Evil

A Google search on the term “child torture” retrieves the following case among others: in 2010, four-year-old Dominick Calhoun of Argentine Township, Michigan, died after days of being beaten and burned by his mother’s boyfriend. “I’ve been doing this a long time, and this is the worst case of child abuse I’ve ever seen,” said the local police chief; “in all respects, he was tortured.” Dominick’s grandmother reported that “burns covered his body” and that his brain was “bashed out of his skull.” A neighbor told police he heard Dominick screaming, over and over again, “Mommy, make him stop.” Dominick’s crime? Wetting his pants.<sup>1</sup>

Where was God while this was going on? Why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect God stand by and let someone torture Dominick to death? Atheists of course reply, “Nowhere: there is no God in the first place.” Some theists answer by offering theodicies: attempts to explain why the universe is in some sense better, or at least no worse, if God allows Dominick’s torture than it would be if God prevented it (see Part 2 of this volume). In their view, God’s letting Dominick suffer must achieve some compensating good (or prevent some evil at least as bad) that not even God could achieve (or prevent) otherwise. Theodicies try to specify those goods (or evils).

Those in the theodicy business face a daunting challenge. On reflection, the only goods we can think of seem to fail, individually and collectively, to provide a sufficient moral justification: either they look too small to *offset* the disvalue of Dominick’s suffering, or

1 “Police: Man tortured 4-year-old to death for wetting his pants,” <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/04/15/michigan.child.torture/>; “Dominick Calhoun, Argentine Township boy who died after beating, remembered for big blue eyes, big personality,” [http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2010/04/dominick\\_calhoun\\_argentine\\_tow.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2010/04/dominick_calhoun_argentine_tow.html) (both accessed March 29, 2013).



else we cannot see how an omnipotent God would *need* to allow Dominick's suffering in order to achieve those goods. Even after thinking hard about it, we cannot see how God's permission of that suffering could be justified by (1) a four-year-old child's somehow deserving it, (2) the value (if any) of the boyfriend's libertarian freedom to torture Dominick, (3) the value of someone else's libertarian freedom to do something in light of the torture, or (4) whatever beneficial attention to the problem of child abuse this case may generate. Justification (1) looks preposterous, and (2)–(4) seem, at best, to violate Dominick's autonomy by treating him merely as a means to some good end that even consequentialists must admit does not look good *enough*.

Even if we consider possible benefits of a less mundane kind, such as Dominick's "experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God,"<sup>2</sup> we cannot see how achieving those benefits would force an omnipotent God to permit Dominick's suffering. Or consider instead the prevention of some horrific evil: suppose that Dominick, had he not been killed, would have grown up to commit brutal murders. Even on that wild supposition his suffering remains unjustified, since his *painless* death would have prevented that future evil at less cost. Furthermore, such speculation about Dominick's future brutality could provide the justification we seek only if we had some reason to believe it, and we do not. Again, our search for an adequate justification comes up empty.

According to leading versions of the evidential argument from evil, the best explanation of our inability to *find* an adequate moral justification for God's letting Dominick suffer is that no such justification *exists*; we cannot find what is not there (see Chapter 4). But any action or permission of a perfect God must be morally justified; therefore, no such God exists. This partly abductive reasoning is the most popular philosophical argument for atheism to emerge in the last several decades. The most popular theistic rebuttal, and the focus of this chapter, is the line of reasoning known as "skeptical theism," so called because it combines theism with the denial of human knowledge or justified belief in a particular domain (see Chapter 4).

## Skeptical Theism

Skeptical theists grant that no theodicy is recognized by us as providing a morally sufficient reason for God's permitting all of the suffering that exists or even for permitting Dominick's particular share of it. Again, however, they stress that this disappointing situation is hardly surprising if theism is true: given the disparity between God's omniscience and our own limited knowledge, it should not surprise us if we fail to grasp the reasons that actually do (indeed, must) justify God's permission of suffering.

Skeptical theists sometimes adopt the strong line that we should expect God's morally sufficient reasons to be inscrutable and sometimes the weaker line that we should not expect those reasons to be scrutable. In either case, however, they aim to undercut what Stephen Wykstra (1996) calls the atheist's "noseeum" inference from our failure to *see* God-justifying reasons to the conclusion that no such reasons *exist*. After all, an omniscient God sees all the possible goods and evils there are, whereas presumably we do not, and an omniscient God sees all the ways in which achieving particular goods requires the permission

2 The phrase is William L. Rowe's, applied in the context of a different case of horrific evil; see Rowe (1996, 277).

of particular evils, whereas again we do not. Michael Bergmann (2001, 279), a defender of skeptical theism, characterizes the position as combining theism with the following additional claims that he thinks everyone should accept:

- ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
- ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
- ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

Bergmann summarizes ST1–ST3 by saying, “It just doesn’t seem unlikely that our understanding of the realm of value falls miserably short of capturing all that is true about that realm” (*ibid.*).

If it works at all, the skeptical theist’s reply works exceedingly well: it undercuts any inference one might draw from the existence of any amount of evil, however horrific, to the nonexistence of morally sufficient reasons for God’s permitting that evil. Consider again the actual evil of Dominick’s suffering and the possible good represented by his “experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God.” None of us can see how achieving that good must constrain God to permit the suffering, and at least some of us share the predicament of Ivan Karamazov: we cannot see how achieving that good would *atone* for the suffering even if the suffering were *necessary* for achieving the good.<sup>3</sup> But, the skeptical theist replies, our epistemic disappointment is not surprising if ST1–ST3 are true. If we are miserably ignorant about the realm of value – and it would not be surprising if we were – then we will be miserably ignorant about the range of justifications at God’s disposal, since of course God (if God exists) has access to the entire realm. Indeed, according to skeptical theism, we are never justified in believing that God’s permission of Dominick’s suffering is not necessary for Dominick’s *own* greater good.

## Skeptical Theism and Radical Skepticism

Some critics of skeptical theism charge that it works *too* well, that its skeptical attitude toward our knowledge of value implies positions that many theists and nontheists alike would reject. For example, Bruce Russell argues that skeptical theism implies radical skepticism about the external world (Russell 1996, 196–197), and Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy (2003, 511) argue that skeptical theism “undermines our ability to engage in perfectly ordinary kinds of moral reasoning.”

A theological basis for external-world skepticism goes back to Descartes, who in my view failed to neutralize it. In the First Meditation, Descartes briefly worries that God might be thoroughly deceiving him, but then he cites God’s reputation for goodness in order to dismiss the worry and move on to consider, instead, the Evil Demon hypothesis. But if

3 See Dostoevsky (1990).

deception is ever good, all things considered – imagine deceiving a murderer about the location of a potential victim – then presumably a good God could deceive us, and if we are as clueless about God's true purposes as skeptical theism says we may be, then for all we know radical deception on God's part represents the *height* of goodness.

Descartes thinks he knows enough about the nature and implications of supreme goodness to rule out a radically deceptive God: in the Third Meditation, he writes that God "cannot be a deceiver, since it is a dictate of the natural light that all fraud and deception spring from some defect." However, while all fraud and deception no doubt spring from defective or imperfect *situations* – for example, ones in which a murderer seeks another victim – it by no means follows that fraud and deception are defective or imperfect *responses* to such situations. In that case, then, fraud and deception are consistent with God's perfection, and we can rule them out only by presuming that God can have no morally sufficient reasons for committing them. Skeptical theism denies us that presumption, and so it denies Descartes his confident dismissal of this particular skeptical worry. For all he or we know, radical divine deception is supremely good.

Even if he dismisses too quickly the possibility of divine deception, however, Descartes at least recognizes his theistic belief as a potential source of radical doubt. No sane person believes in the existence of an Evil Demon whose job it is to deceive us about our surroundings, but plenty of people believe in the existence of God, a being powerful enough to bring off radical deception and not barred from it if we allow that deception can be good, all things considered.

But there is another way in which theism threatens our knowledge quite apart from the possibility of divine deception. According to theism, something literally *magical* stands at the foundation of our universe: a nonphysical God who created the universe from nothing at all and via methods that we have no reason to think natural science could ever unravel. God had free rein over which natural laws, if any, to create, and given science's unavoidable *reliance* on natural laws there is no reason to think science could dig "underneath" all natural laws to discover the reasons, if any, God had for creating them. If the universe is at bottom magical, then our inescapably nonmagical ways of figuring it out are doomed to fail eventually. According to naturalism, by contrast, nothing magical stands at the foundation of our universe, and so there is no reason in principle why science cannot make our knowledge of the origin and workings of the universe ever deeper.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, insofar as we can explain some fact in natural-scientific terms, to that degree we do not – and, more important, need not – invoke the intentions of agents to explain it. But theism regards God's intentions as *fundamental* to the universe, in which case we cannot hope to understand the universe ever more deeply by means of our nonmagical scientific methods. Unlike naturalism, theism puts a barrier in the path of our ever-deeper knowledge of the universe, a barrier we must hit sooner or later.

4 See Schaffer (2003, 503–504); compare Ladyman *et al.* (2007): "We have inductive grounds for denying that there is (an ontologically) fundamental level (of reality), since every time one has been posited, it has turned out not to be fundamental after all" (p. 178). Alvin Plantinga has famously argued that naturalism itself provides grounds for skepticism about the external world. His argument is trenchantly criticized by the contributors to Beilby (2002).

## Skeptical Theism and Moral Obligation

Problems arise for skeptical theism in the ethical realm as well. In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider an ethical objection to skeptical theism raised by Almeida and Oppy and will defend that objection against replies jointly offered by two skeptical theists, Bergmann and co-author Michael Rea. I will only mention here, without elaborating on it, a familiar theological casualty of skeptical theism that theists may well find troubling: If worries about our poor grasp of value prevent us from *doubting* God's goodness on the basis of the suffering we experience or witness, they ought to prevent us from *affirming* God's goodness on the basis of the sudden cures, spontaneous recoveries, and averted disasters that we experience or witness.<sup>5</sup>

Almeida and Oppy's most telling criticism of skeptical theism accuses it of undermining our ordinary sense of moral obligation. Suppose we can easily prevent some horrific evil (call it "E") such as the torture of Dominick Calhoun, and suppose we also endorse ST1–ST3. In those circumstances, according to Almeida and Oppy, even if we ourselves can see nothing that would justify allowing E to occur,

we should insist that it is not unlikely that there is some . . . reason for a perfect being's not intervening to stop E. Plainly, we should also concede – by parity of reason – that . . . it is not unlikely that there is some good which, if we were smarter and better equipped, we could recognize as a reason for *our* not intervening to stop the event. . . . But it would be *appalling* for us to allow this consideration to stop us from intervening. Yet, if we take [ST1–ST3] seriously, how can we also maintain that we are morally required to intervene? (Almeida and Oppy 2003, 505–506, first emphasis added)

Hence it appears that skeptical theism induces a kind of moral paralysis that theists and nontheists alike would rightly abhor.

One objection to Almeida and Oppy's argument relies on distinguishing between the indicative conditional (a) "If E occurs, then God has a morally sufficient reason for letting E occur" and the subjunctive conditional (b) "If E *were* to occur, then God *would* have a morally sufficient reason for letting E occur." Because it imagines us considering E when there is still a chance for us to prevent E, Almeida and Oppy's argument depends on (b) rather than (a). But according to the objection, (a) does not imply (b), and hence those who accept (a) need not accept (b). According to theism, because Dominick's torture in fact occurred, God had a morally sufficient reason for letting it happen. But, according to the objector, that claim would not have allowed an onlooker to reason this way: "If Dominick's torture were to occur because I allowed it, then God would have a morally sufficient reason for allowing it too."

However, I do not see how the distinction between (a) and (b) grounds an effective objection to Almeida and Oppy. Although indicative conditionals do not in general imply subjunctive conditionals, that fact is irrelevant here. Theists must regard each of (a) and (b) as *necessarily* true. Any possible world in which God lets E occur without having a morally sufficient reason for letting E occur is a world in which God lacks perfection in power, knowledge, or goodness, and theism says there are no such worlds: God is perfect

5 See Swinburne (1998, 27), cited in Pereboom (2005a, 165).

in every world, not just the actual world. Almeida and Oppy, therefore, need not rely on the false assumption that any indicative conditional implies the corresponding subjunctive conditional. They can rely instead on the fact that (b) is necessarily true from the perspective of theism.

Skeptical theists might object to Almeida and Oppy's argument in various other ways. First, they might object that framing the moral problem in terms of the production of good consequences and the prevention of bad ones simply assumes a consequentialist framework and ignores deontologically important ideas such as the rights and the autonomy of those whom we allow to suffer. Second, they might challenge the assumption that we are obligated to intervene *only if* we can reasonably judge the probability that E is for the best, all things considered; perhaps we have that obligation regardless of any judgment of probability. Third, they might challenge the closely related assumption that our obligation to intervene dissolves *because* we also believe it not unlikely that, were we smarter and better equipped, we would discern a good reason for us not to intervene; again, perhaps we have that obligation regardless of our attitude toward such a counterfactual conditional.

The first reply, attacking the broadly consequentialist framework of the problem, has some force. It does seem that Dominick's autonomy gets ignored in all this talk about the possible goods produced and possible evils prevented if we let him be tortured to death; such talk threatens to treat him merely as a means to an end rather than as an end in himself. The problem, however, is that ST1–ST3 are *themselves* couched in broadly consequentialist terms, or at least they presuppose justifications couched in those terms. I know of no version of skeptical theism that claims that God might have a nonconsequentialist (say, Kantian) duty to permit Dominick's suffering, a duty that remains inscrutable to us for nonconsequentialist reasons. Nor can I see how such a version could plausibly work. On the standard Kantian theory of duty, we can discover duties by rational reflection alone. Hence, even if it is possible for us to overlook some existing duties, or mistake for duties what are in fact not duties, it is less plausible that our reflective understanding of our duties should fail to be even *representative* of the duties there actually are. A deontological version of ST1–ST3 therefore looks less plausible than a consequentialist version, and so it becomes hard to defend skeptical theism by rejecting consequentialism.

Indeed, the strongly consequentialist flavor of ST1–ST3 gives anticonsequentialists an independent reason to reject skeptical theism. Some people oppose consequentialism because they say it makes the moral status of our actions unknowable by us, given our inability to know the *total* consequences of our actions and given that the unforeseeable consequences swamp the foreseeable ones.<sup>6</sup> These people reason, plausibly, that it would *make no sense* if we could commit moral wrongs whose wrongness none of us could ever detect. One might reply that we could commit wrongs out of inculpable ignorance without ever being *blameworthy* for those wrongs, but this reply threatens to sever any connection between wrongness and blameworthiness. It seems odd to think that we could spend our lives doing wrong – not just doing *harm*, doing *wrong* – without ever being blameworthy for it. If consequentialism implies that we could, consequentialism inherits that oddity, and likewise for skeptical theism if its reliance on consequentialism implies the same result. Instead, I think skeptical theism's best answer to anticonsequentialist worries is the one I broached earlier: skeptical theists should keep their consequentialism and claim that, for

6 I take this worry about consequentialism to be one of the points of Lenman (2000).

all we know, Dominick's suffering was necessary for his *own* greater good. In that case, the threat to his autonomy becomes less worrisome: we do sometimes force children to undergo suffering against their will for what we take to be their own good (think of a painful vaccination), and we regard ourselves as justified in doing so.

Now consider the second and third replies to Almeida and Oppy, according to which we *are* obligated to prevent E even if we cannot reasonably judge the probability that E is for the best, all things considered, and even if we cannot discount the likelihood that there is some compelling reason, beyond our ken, for not intervening. The following analogy, I believe, can help us to see that those replies will not work.<sup>7</sup> Imagine that a well-armed tribesman walks into a jungle field hospital and sees someone in strange garb (known to us as the surgeon) about to cut open the abdomen of the tribesman's wife, who lies motionless on a table. It certainly looks to the tribesman like a deadly assault, and thus he sees good reason to attack the surgeon and no particular reason not to. But suppose that the tribesman also believes that strangely garbed magicians (known to us as surgeons) travel around who miraculously save dying people by cutting them open. As a result, he occurrently believes "If this is one of those life-saving miracles, I shouldn't expect to know it." The incision is about to happen, and clearly there is no time to investigate before acting. Given his beliefs, does it follow that he *ought* to attack the surgeon, that is, that he would be wrong to refrain? I think not. At most what follows is that he *may* attack the surgeon, even at the cost of preventing his wife's life-saving appendectomy: we get at most permission rather than obligation. Skeptical theism asks us to admit that we occupy the same position with respect to the realm of value that the tribesman occupies with respect to modern medicine: we should not expect to see how it works. Yet skeptical theists such as Bergmann and Rea claim to preserve, despite their skepticism, our ordinary moral *obligation* to intervene in such cases (Bergmann and Rea 2005, 247). Their claim is correct only if the tribesman is obligated to attack the surgeon.

Again, however, the tribesman is not obligated to attack: his legitimate self-doubt ought to give him pause, or at any rate it lets him off the moral hook if he decides not to intervene, for he sees a reason to think he may *bring about*, rather than prevent, his wife's death by acting as his instincts tell him to act. Skeptical theists persistently claim that only those goods you know of – rather than goods beyond your ken – can justify your inaction in the face of what seems to you to be an obligation to intervene (e.g., Howard-Snyder 1996, 292–293, criticized in Pereboom 2005b, 89). But their claim ignores the fact that, in high-stakes circumstances, *recognition of your own ignorance* can also justify your inaction, a point conceded by two recent defenders of skeptical theism; they write that "recognition of [your] ignorance concerning the likelihood of there being unknown goods" can render you "unable to make an all-things-considered judgment as to whether to do [some action] A," in which case "you are entirely within your rights in choosing to do A – indeed, no one is in a position to criticise any choice you make in these circumstances" (Trakakis and Nagasawa 2004, note 8). As before, we get *permission* to intervene rather than an obligation to intervene: choosing not to intervene would not expose you to legitimate criticism.<sup>8</sup>

7 See Piper (2007, 71) for a different analogy put to a similar purpose.

8 On this point, compare Stump (1985, 412–413): "God can see into the minds and hearts of human beings and determine what sort and amount of suffering is likely to produce the best results; we cannot. . . . Therefore, since

There is, in addition, a type of belief we can expect theists to possess and nontheists to lack that also undermines the moral obligation to intervene in cases of horrific evil: the belief that *someone exists who can make this suffering turn out for the sufferer's best even if I do not intervene*. Given the badness of severe suffering, why do we not feel obligated to prevent children from ever undergoing painful rabies vaccinations? Because we are confident that sometimes severe suffering will turn out for the sufferer's best. Suppose we believe, as many theists do, that someone exists who can *always* make suffering turn out for the sufferer's best (see, e.g., Gellman 2010, 188; Stump 1985, 411–413). We ought, I submit, to feel less obligated (or less clearly obligated, if obligation does not come in degrees) to prevent and relieve suffering than we would feel if we did not believe in such a potential guarantor of a good outcome.

Again, one might counter that God makes us witness current or imminent suffering because God *wants* us to reduce or prevent it, but skeptical theism denies us any confidence in drawing that conclusion, as a general rule of thumb and even more so with regard to a particular case of suffering. For suppose that the tribesman is a theist; even then he cannot confidently conclude, given what *else* he believes about his own competency in that situation, that God would want him to attack the surgeon. We have yet to see, therefore, how to reconcile skeptical theism with our moral obligation to intervene in cases like the torture of Dominick Calhoun.

## Skeptical Theism and God's Commands

Skeptical theists sometimes reply that God's commands give them a source of moral obligation that *withstands* the skeptical force of ST1–ST3 and that *does* obligate them to intervene to prevent suffering like Dominick's if they easily enough can:

Sceptical theists, after all, are *theists*. . . . [T]heists very typically believe that God has commanded his creatures to behave in certain ways; and they also very typically believe that God's commands provide all-things-considered reasons to act. Thus, a sceptical theist will very likely not find it . . . plausible . . . that ST1–ST3 leave us without an all-things-considered reason to prevent harm to others in cases like [Dominick's]. For even if ST1–ST3 imply that we do not know *much* about the realm of value, they do not at all imply . . . that we lack knowledge of God's commands *as* God's commands. (Bergmann and Rea 2005, 244, emphases in original)

This line of reasoning can seem compelling enough that it is worth showing in some detail why skeptical theists cannot consistently rely on it.<sup>9</sup> In short, we cannot identify God's

all human suffering is *prima facie* evil, and since we do not know with any high degree of probability how much (if any) of it is likely to result in good for any particular sufferer on any particular occasion, it is reasonable for us to eliminate the suffering as much as we can." Note Stump's use of the term "reasonable": she evidently wishes to preserve our moral permission to eliminate suffering. Yet ordinary morality regards it as not just reasonable but obligatory for us to intervene, at least on some occasions; ordinary morality imposes an obligation to intervene, and preserving permission need not preserve the obligation.

9 Schnall (2007) relies on the same line of reasoning in defending skeptical theism against the charge of moral skepticism.



commands, resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to our actual circumstances without assuming a greater knowledge of God's reasons, and therefore a better understanding of the realm of value, than skeptical theism grants us.

### *Problem 1: identifying God's commands*

Taking guidance from God's commands raises the prior question of how to identify what God commands. Some theistic religions claim that God never issued or no longer endorses some of the things regarded as operative divine commands by other theistic religions. Suppose we consider one obvious source of God's commands if any such commands exist: the monotheistic sacred scriptures. Does God command followers to circumcise every male child among them, as Genesis 17:10 reports? Traditional Jews say yes, while many Christians say either that God never commanded circumcision or that the circumcision command has been superseded (see Galatians 5:6). The Qur'an contains no command to circumcise, although most Muslims continue it as a traditional practice. Christians claim that God commands the baptism of all people in the name of the Trinity (Matthew 28:19), a claim that Jews and Muslims of course reject. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), Jesus announces commands that are supposed to supersede Old Testament law concerning divorce, the swearing of oaths, the treatment of enemies, and *lex talionis* ("an eye for an eye"). Holy writ contains many similar examples of conflicting commands.

Since none of these conflicting putative revelations is self-authenticating, followers of theistic religions have to decide which of them to take as genuine. The mode of presentation is the same in each case: the commands appear in ancient texts, such as the Old Testament, that the various religions often agree in revering as God's Word. So nothing about the means of presentation distinguishes them, forcing adherents of the various religions to rely on their independent moral judgment to tell which of those commands most likely *do* express the will of a morally perfect God and whether God *does* intend the later commands to supersede the earlier ones. Consequently, identifying God's genuine commands requires human insight into God's reasons and intentions.

Suppose, for example, that a traditional theist announces that he has felt the presence of God commanding him to quit his gambling habit and donate to charity what he would have spent on gambling. We can predict the approval of his clergy and fellow parishioners. But compare that approval with the reaction he would get were he to announce that God had told him to slaughter everyone in the neighboring town. In declaring that God could not possibly have commanded the latter action, his co-religionists would not rest their case on the nature of the alleged communication – "Was it a voice? If so, what did it sound like, and did anyone else hear it?" – for nothing about the means of presentation would in fact quell their doubt that it actually came from God. Instead, they would rule it out as a divine command purely on the basis of its *morally objectionable content*. The Old Testament reports God as having repeatedly commanded the killing of men, women, and children (see 1 Samuel 15:3, among many examples), so it is not as if a command to kill would be out of character for such a God. Nevertheless, nowadays, anyone's claim that God has commanded him to wipe out the neighboring town would rightly encounter at least initial disbelief even among his religious group – principally, if not exclusively, on moral grounds. Thus, skeptical theism faces a problem encountered by divine command theories of ethics, and at least as acutely: our very *identification* "of God's commands as God's commands" (to quote Bergmann and Rea) presupposes that we independently understand the realm

of value well enough to tell which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command. How, then, can we understand the realm of value well enough to tell which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command and yet, as skeptical theists insist, not understand that realm well enough to tell which cases of horrific suffering a perfect being would be at all likely to permit?

One might object that the skeptical theses ST1–ST3 are consistent with our ability to know *enough* about the realm of value to know which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command. This objection echoes the closing sentence of the passage from Bergmann and Rea that I quoted earlier, and it reflects too optimistic a view of our ability to contain the spread of skepticism. According to skeptical theism, we lack what it takes even to *estimate the likelihood* that some compensating good justifies a perfect being's permitting Dominick to suffer as he did.<sup>10</sup> Skeptical theists grant that none of us can detect that compensating good, but given our limited knowledge of the realm of value, they ask, how could we estimate the likelihood that some compensating good lies beyond the limit of what we detect? By the same token, however, we cannot estimate the likelihood that some reason lying beyond our ken turns what seems to us a diabolical command into just the thing a perfect being would tell someone to do under the particular circumstances.

### *Problem 2: selective obedience*

Even when theists concede that God has issued a particular command, they sometimes consciously choose, on what look to be moral grounds, to disobey it. According to Leviticus 19–20, God forbids breeding cattle with other livestock (apparently beefalo is an abomination in God's eyes), mixing the kinds of seed sown onto a field, and wearing a garment containing both linen and wool. God also imposes the death penalty for cursing one's parents, adultery, male homosexual conduct (see also Romans 1:27, 32), certain types of incest (which require death for everyone involved, sometimes by burning), bestiality, witchcraft, and blasphemy. Yet it is unlikely that even Orthodox Jewish parents kill their children for parent-cursing or blasphemy, because they reason (if perhaps implicitly) that God couldn't *really* want them to do that. So theists must be *nonskeptical* concerning their capacity to discern God's reasons, to tell *which* of God's commands God really wants us to obey. I wager that Bergmann and Rea don't check the label for divinely prohibited fiber-content before buying a suit of clothes, and not just because they might not know about the prohibition in Leviticus 19:19, but because they assume, if only implicitly, that the Creator of the universe surely does not *care* about that issue, even though the Bible portrays him as caring about it.<sup>11</sup> Their assumption is as sensible as it is hard to square with their skepticism about our knowledge of God's underlying purposes.

It does not solve the problem, furthermore, to respond that these embarrassing commands applied only to the ancient Israelites in their specific time and place, because we still must rely on our own judgment – independent of any divine commands – to determine

10 Rowe says this: “[According to skeptical theists,] since we don’t know that the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are, we can’t know that it is even likely that there are no goods that justify God in permitting whatever amount of apparently pointless, horrific evil there might occur in the world. Indeed, if human life were *nothing more than a series of agonizing moments from birth to death*, their position would still require them to say that we can’t reasonably infer that it is even likely that God does not exist” (Rowe 2001, 298, emphasis in original).

11 For the record, Bergmann and Rea (2005, 241) identify themselves as skeptical theists and thus as theists.

whether any of those ancient commands are meant to apply to us today. Even if scholarly exegesis can explain away the most awkward commands while retaining the rest, such explanations will surely depend on assuming human insight into the *relative importance* of particular values in God's grand scheme. Why not say that God cares first and foremost about the composition of our clothing and only secondarily about harm to children? Because we know independently that such an attitude would be unworthy of a morally perfect being, something we could not know without knowing more about the realm of value than skeptical theism says we can know.

### *Problem 3: lack of specific guidance*

Bergmann and Rea claim that God's commands give even skeptical theists "an all-things-considered reason to prevent harm to others in cases like" the torture of Dominick. While we regard it as likely – again, based on our independent moral judgment – that God (if God exists) wants us to protect innocent children from harm, has God in fact commanded it? Biblical commands are often extremely specific, not simply general principles we must then somehow apply to particular situations. Has God specifically commanded us to prevent child abuse or even specifically commanded us not to abuse children? Not in any scripture I can find. On the contrary, one finds death-penalty offences for children listed in Exodus (21:15, 21:17), Leviticus (20:9), and Deuteronomy (21:18–21), apparently endorsed by Jesus (Matthew 15:4; Mark 7:10), and several apparent endorsements of child-beating in Proverbs (13:24, 20:30, 22:15, 23:13–14, 29:15). Granted, Matthew 18:6 warns us against *corrupting* those children who believe in Jesus, and verse 18:10 commands us not to "despise" such children, but it offers such children no specific protection against the kind of abuse Dominick suffered and offers no protection at all for children who do not believe in Jesus.

In sum, had Dominick been beaten to death for parent-cursing or blasphemy, it is not clear that his abuse would have crossed any line drawn by the Bible or that any recognized command would have given us an all-things-considered reason to prevent his death. If you reply that in God's eyes a four-year-old simply *cannot* commit the crimes of parent-cursing or blasphemy, I would say that you are relying – entirely properly – on your ordinary moral judgment, independently of any divine commands. But Bergmann and Rea's point is that God's commands can guide skeptical theists even after they have *stopped* relying on their ordinary moral judgment to fathom God's ways.

Furthermore, if we try to extrapolate from God's pronouncements on *other* topics in order to tease out the principles God wants us to apply to the case of child abuse, we must assume for ourselves a substantial degree of insight into God's purposes. Consider, for instance, the second greatest commandment according to Jesus, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39), which some Christians may offer as a way of *dismissing* the jumble of conflicting commands I cited earlier. Suppose I hate myself; am I off the hook with regard to loving others, or, indeed, am I then obliged to hate others? "Of course not," one might reply; "the commandment presupposes a healthy degree of self-love on the part of everyone to whom it applies. Moreover, as God's creature, you ought to love yourself and hence ought to love others." Maybe so, but that reply explicitly depends on a claim about what the command presupposes: self-love on the part of those it commands. Thus, it presumes insight into God's assumptions in issuing the command, insight skeptical theism says we have no right to think we possess.

Moreover, even if we ignore these interpretive problems and grant that the command “Love thy neighbor as thyself” gives us *some* moral guidance on what to do about Dominick’s suffering – presumably we ought to try to relieve it – it fails to give us enough guidance to answer the moral question that Almeida and Oppy pose in their criticism of skeptical theism: Must we intervene to *prevent* such suffering if we easily can? Even if the command clearly enough implies that neither his mother’s boyfriend nor anyone else may torture Dominick, the command does not tell us whether, for example, we must use whatever *force* may be needed to prevent the torture – not, again, unless we make assumptions about the relative *importance* and overall *purpose* of the command, assumptions that skeptical theism denies us any confidence in making. In obeying the command to love one another, must we prevent people from behaving in harmful ways, or is it God’s business to prevent them? The command itself does not say, and hence we have to rely on moral assumptions, including assumptions about the command’s context and purpose, to answer this (by no means easy) question.<sup>12</sup> In sum, we simply cannot *interpret* commands as expressions of God’s will without assuming we know much, independently of those commands, about God’s intentions, just as we cannot interpret a constitution *as* expressing the will of its framers without assuming we know much about *their* intentions. But, of course, our knowing enough to identify, interpret, and apply God’s commands ought to increase our confidence in drawing the very “noseeum” inferences that skeptical theism denies us the right to draw.

At this stage, one might reply that God himself could provide the insight we need in order for us to identify, interpret, and apply his commands – the insight I have said skeptical theism denies us any reason to think we possess. According to this reply, we would find ourselves in a skeptical quandary about God’s commands except that God has given us, or at least could give us, the guidance we need to escape the quandary. But the skeptical problem recurs at this stage too. As I argued earlier, if deception is ever good, all things considered, then it is consistent with God’s perfection that he deceive us at any time, including when he apparently tells us his intentions and purposes in issuing a command.<sup>13</sup> The same result also applies if God ostensibly tells us his justification for permitting some evil whose justification we have trouble discerning on our own: skeptical theism denies us any confidence that God is disclosing his true justification. In fact, it is worse. Skeptical theism denies us any confidence that we have *ever* managed to identify, by any means, the justification God actually relies on for any of his actions or omissions: for all we know, any justification we entertain, however compelling it might seem, is shallower, or at least other, than the justification that actually motivates a perfectly wise God. Skeptical theism makes our relation to our Creator deeply mysterious, even mystical.

## Acknowledgments

Parts of this chapter are reproduced from Maitzen (2007) and Maitzen (2009) with the kind permission of the publisher, Springer Science+Business Media. I thank Christian Lee and Matthew Lee for helpful written comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

12 One complication for Christians in answering this question arises from Jesus’s pacifistic command in Matthew 5:39 that they “resist not evil.”

13 See also Wielenberg (2010, 517), which cites examples from the Old and New Testaments that portray both God the Father and God the Son as having deceived.

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# The Global Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism

IAN WILKS

Skeptical theism is a stalemating technique in debates over the problem of evil (see Chapter 29). Its aim is to establish a confounding factor against the evidence of evil and make that evidence inadmissible in debate over the existence of God. This outcome does not help persuade a nontheist that God exists. But it does help a theist from being persuaded that God does not exist. It does so at a cost, however, and the purpose of this chapter is to focus on that cost.

Two theses are especially relevant for understanding skeptical theism.

The first operates in the background. It is the thesis that God may be thought justified in his actions and permissions through the consequences to which those actions and permissions lead. What we experience as an evil may in fact lead to an outweighing good, or suppress some even greater evil. It is the outcome that is decisive, not the internal character of the evil itself. So to understand what a loving deity would do and allow, we must be prepared to think in consequentialist terms.

The second forms the core of skeptical theism. It is the thesis that we may not be aware of all the goods and evils there are, so we may not always be able to discern the reasons that justify God's actions and permissions. In other words, the consequences of those actions and permissions may be quite opaque to us now.

It is in this sense that skeptical theism is skeptical. The first thesis has us looking for good consequences in justifying God's actions and permissions, but the second tells us to form no expectation of finding them in all cases, since we have no reason to think we know enough about goods and evils to do so. We should be skeptical about our ability to identify any divine action or permission as an unjustified evil; in other words, we should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do or permit.<sup>1</sup> This view

1 It would be evil for God to do or permit an unjustified evil but not for him to do or permit a justified one. If we cannot reliably distinguish justified from unjustified evils, then we cannot know what it would be evil for God to do or permit. For the purposes of this chapter, "what it would be evil for God to do or permit" will mean what it would be evil for God to do or permit *in the physical universe during historical time*.



presents a circumscribed kind of skepticism, attaching only to the completeness of our knowledge of goods and evils, and our ability to discern God-justifying reasons. It is not intended as a radical, all-encompassing skepticism, and strikes its proponents as having a generally uncomplicated fit with the sort of theistic belief system it is meant to defend.

To others, however, the fit has seemed uneasy. Claiming some knowledge of what it would be evil for God to do or permit can seem an important element of theistic belief systems. So can the closely related position of claiming some knowledge of what it would be *good* for God to do or permit. My design in the following is to argue that theists generally set great store by both claims, and that skeptical theists court inconsistency insofar as they contest them. Chapter 30 in this anthology has raised certain problems in the area of ethics for skeptical theism. My own concerns are more broadly epistemic; I see skeptical theism as posing a specific problem about the possibility of knowing God (see Chapter 32), and a general problem about the possibility of knowing anything at all. These two epistemic concerns are the chief subject of the ensuing remarks.<sup>2</sup>

## Skeptical Theism and Knowledge of God

Consider these words of the psalmist, addressed to God:

One generation shall laud thy works to another,  
and shall declare thy mighty acts.  
On the glorious splendor of thy majesty,  
And on thy wondrous works, I will meditate.  
Men shall proclaim the might of thy terrible acts,  
and I will declare thy greatness.  
They shall pour forth the fame of thy abundant goodness,  
and shall sing aloud of thy righteousness  
(Psalm 145:4–7, Revised Standard Version)

The outlook expressed here is the familiar one of seeing tangible evidence of God in the many species of good things present in the world. When this connection is drawn in formal reasoning the result is one or another version of the argument from design. Aquinas' Fifth Way is a celebrated example, which, for evidence of God's existence, appeals to the frequency with which things lacking intelligence operate to their own advantage (*Summa Theologiae* I.2.3 c). It is a common strand of content in hymn and prayer, as well as argument, to associate goods with God, whether in praising him, thanking him, or affirming the belief that he exists.

How does skeptical theism align itself with this pervasive element of religious experience? If we should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to

<sup>2</sup> This division of terrain corresponds to Richard Gale's construal of the global objection, in which he proposes to show that "the defensive skeptic's argument for out not being cognitively capable of determining whether a given defense is actual not only precludes the sort of natural theology endorsed by many defensive skeptics but, more seriously, admits of generalization into an argument for a compete, across-the-board skepticism" (Gale 1996, 201). "Defensive skeptic" is Gale's label for the skeptical theist.

do, then, it seems, we should also be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be *good* for God to do. After all, the point made in the first of the above theses – that God may be thought justified in his actions and permissions through their consequences – is not specific to seeming evils. It applies to seeming goods as well. Then so does the skeptical point raised in the second thesis; the consequences of a seeming good may run quite contrary to *its* appearance too. Whether confronted with apparent goods or apparent evils, we have equally little reason to suppose that we can discern their actual standing as good or evil on the basis of properties internal to them. Accordingly, we have no reason to think we see in a particular good a sign of God's presence any more than we have reason to think we see in a particular evil a sign of his absence. The rationale that discounts the problem of evil should be applied with equal force to any form of the design argument which appeals to the presence of goods.<sup>3</sup>

Michael Bergmann, one of skeptical theism's staunchest defenders, accepts this result. He characterizes the above line of reasoning thus:

Some arguments for God's existence based on identifying something as an all-things-considered good – even in light of its consequences – will be undermined by the skeptical theist's skepticism. . . . Given our cognitive limitations, we simply don't know what evils might be entailed by those good things and this prevents us from being able to conclude that they are all-things-considered goods that an omnibenevolent being would bring about. (Bergmann 2009, 389)

He endorses this reasoning – “The skeptical theist's response to this charge should, I think, be to accept it” (Bergmann 2009, 309) – while emphasizing that there are other ways of arguing for God's existence that remain unaffected by this concession. But while there are indeed many avenues for providing reasoned demonstration that God exists, the subclass of those that point to a *beneficent* deity is somewhat smaller, and the concession of one of these a correspondingly greater loss. But whatever degree of loss this is to the program of natural theology, the skeptical view that motivates it holds wider significance for religious experience taken more broadly. Taking particular goods as signs of God's presence is a pervasive element of such experience. Seeing things and events in the world around us as manifestations of God – as is done in the above psalmic lines – furnishes for the believer a first-hand display of divine providence in operation. It operates to concretize the notion of a beneficent deity. The loss of this tendency, and the many themes of worship and contemplation that it informs, would herald great changes, not trivial ones, to the lived experience of religious faith. These changes deserve to be acknowledged in the accounting of what is gained and lost in the skeptical move endorsed by skeptical theists.

This move imputes – in a phrase of Bruce Russell and Stephen Wykstra – significant *moral depth* to the world we experience. Just as science has shown the world to be physically deep, in the sense of having fundamental causes that are quite remote from surface phenomena, skeptical theism is proposing that it is morally deep as well, in the sense of having, as the divinely appointed causes of things, goods that are likewise remote from surface phenomena. Hence we should be open to the likelihood that many goods below the world's “puzzling observable surface, many of the moral causes of God's current allowings and intervenings, would be ‘deep’ moral goods” (Russell and Wykstra 1988, 147). It is this possibility that establishes the skeptical theist's defensive line against the problem of evil. The

3 See O'Connor (1998, 219–220) and Wilks (2004, 316–319).

physical phenomena we experience give us no direct testimony about the nature or existence of subatomic particles, and in like manner, the evils we experience give us no direct testimony about the nature or existence of God (which is good for the theist because it would appear to be negative testimony). But in this morally deep world, it should also be the case that the *goods* we experience give us no direct testimony on the nature or existence of God, and it is this possibility that suggests that the skeptical theists' defensive line may come at a cost. The common expectation that God created humans in such a way as to surround us with intimations of his being in the goodness and greatness of his works amounts to an assumption that the world is in fact not as morally deep as claimed. This assumption in turn suggests that theists should have some confidence in their ability to discern God-justifying reasons for evils, even though such discernment has been in some cases difficult to achieve, and in other cases is yet to be achieved.

Claiming, as per the first thesis above, that God-justifying reasons may lie in the consequences of divine actions and permissions, and then claiming, as per the second thesis, that we have no reason to think we grasp those consequences in any given case, will indeed provide a stalemating technique against the problem of evil. But those claims, taken together, will also undercut what is commonly an important element of the theistic worldview. Skeptical theism is not just at odds with goods-based design arguments. It is also at odds with broader aspects of theistic experience of which such arguments are emblematic.<sup>4</sup>

## Skeptical Theism and Knowledge in General

Of course we must remember that, for their convictions about God's goodness, theists do have various sources of support. Scriptural writings provide such support, as do personal revelations. So in the end, theists may not actually need to appeal to experiences of good things in the world. If so then the force of the earlier arguments on skeptical theists might appear diminished.

But a wider set of considerations will apply to *any* source of evidence emanating from God, regardless of its medium, and it is their scope in this regard that constitutes the global objection as genuinely global. The relevant line of argument cites one possible evil in particular: divine deception. God is normally believed to be truthful in his communications and manifestations, a belief that follows from the further belief that deception is evil, such that it would be evil for God to perform deceptive acts. But skeptical theism suggests that we should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do. So the ground seems cut away from the normal belief that God is truthful in his communications and manifestations. This result attaches not just to how God is manifest in the physical world, but how God is manifest in scriptural writings and personal revelations too.

Erik Wielenberg makes this case for beliefs specifically held on the pretext that they were directly communicated by God. If skeptical theists are to be believed, we should indeed be skeptical about our ability to identify any divine action or permission as an unjustified evil;

4 The effect of skeptical theism on reasoned discourse about God has been noted elsewhere. Laraudogoitia (2000) reasons that on skeptical theism theists are not entitled to claim that "it appears that there is no gratuitous evil" (p. 85); the implications for natural theology are clear. Engel (2004) argues along the same lines. Snapper (2011) responds to both.

so it might turn out to be the case that some divine falsehood serves some justifying purpose unknown to us. Accordingly, Wielenberg argues, if skeptical theists are correct, then we have no reason to think that God would not be justified in uttering a falsehood – or to think that, if justified, he would necessarily avoid uttering one (Wielenberg 2010, 513). From this point, the way lies open to skepticism about the truth of divine assertions generally, a skepticism that seems insidious to theistic belief.<sup>5</sup>

Wielenberg limits his argument about divine veracity to cases where our beliefs depend entirely on their status as divine assertions (i.e., on their not being confirmable in other ways, such as by evidence of experience or reason). Other like-minded commentators have dispensed with this limitation. Divine deception could apply much more widely than this, even to some of the evidence of experience or reason – or even to most or all of this evidence. It is when skepticism of this degree comes under question that the global objection lives up to its name.

Bruce Russell develops this position around the example of the apparent age of the world. Consider the possibility that it was created by God 100 years ago, but with all the signs of geologic age it currently possesses. Obviously an omnipotent deity could do this, and a deceptive deity would be willing. So on what basis do we preserve a belief that the world is in fact about as old as we think it is? If, for all we know, there might be some god-justifying reason for all the evil we see around us, why might there not be one for such deceptions, too? For all we know, God may well have a reason to create a world that looks a lot older than it is. To reject this conclusion is by implication to reject skeptical theism itself:

If it is not reasonable to believe that God deceived us, for some reason beyond our ken, when he created the universe, it is not reasonable to believe that there is some reason beyond our ken which, if God exists, would justify him in allowing all the suffering we see. (Russell 1996, 197)

Along the same lines, Richard Gale (1996, 208–209) and Mark Bernstein (1998, 160) suggest that an evil demon hypothesis fits readily within the skeptical theist's account.<sup>6</sup> If, for all we know, there might be some god-justifying reason for all the evil we see around us, why might there not be one for systematic, even comprehensive deception on the part of God? Of course the idea is scandalous to theists, but that is only because of the general association of deception with unjustified evils. What if some high level of deception actually turns out to be a justified evil? That seems pretty unlikely, to say the least. But it is the very point of skeptical theism to give us pause about that sort of probability assessment. We have no reason, it tells us, to think we know enough about goods and evils to rule out a God-justifying reason for deception, or even to form an estimation about how likely it is that there could be such a reason.

Now the possibility of divine deception has not been regarded by theists as a genuine problem. That is because they normally take themselves to have some insight into what it would be evil for God to do, enough insight to rule out that possibility. But skeptical theism appears to imply that such confidence is unfounded, and in this fashion appears to open the theistic outlook to varieties of skepticism that do not normally beset it. How is skeptical

5 A related argument is found in Beaudoin (2000). But see Beaudoin (2005, 45–48, and 55, note 16) for some tempering of the conclusion reached in this earlier source. A direct reply to Wielenberg is found in Segal (2011).

6 See also Beaudoin (1998, 413).

theism to be defended against this claim? John Beaudoin suggests a remedy. Our lack of knowledge about what it would be evil for God to do or permit may well make it difficult to show that we are not the victims of divine deception. But maybe there are other ways of showing this, ways that do not presuppose knowing what it would be evil for God to do or permit, but which appeal to other kinds of knowledge, and which are therefore not affected by skeptical theism. He says that

the skeptical theist might have good independent reasons for believing in an old universe – some reason not having to do with God’s moral character. Perhaps there is some theologically neutral, telling philosophical argument for rejecting skepticism about the past. (Beaudoin 2005, 45)

So he proposes that theists find the sort of “reasons available to nontheists for trusting in the reliability of our belief-forming mechanisms” (Beaudoin 2005, 45).<sup>7</sup> These reasons would have to be compatible with their set of theistic beliefs but would not be part of it (hence the availability of such reasons to nontheists). Concerns about whether God is deceiving us about the age of the world, for example, can be addressed by geological data. Concerns about possible divine deception in other areas can be addressed by other kinds of knowledge germane to those other areas. Skeptical theism asserts itself within the domain of religious belief where other kinds of knowledge do not operate, but the sort of skepticism it poses need not spill over into other domains where those other kinds of knowledge *do* operate. Its skepticism can be safely confined within the limits of that religious domain.

This defense of skeptical theism may in turn be challenged – this time with the sort of counterclaim common in debates over extreme skepticism, where the remedy proposed to address the skepticism is simply made subject to the very pretext that produced the skepticism in the first place. The geological evidence cited as reassurance that the world really is as old as believed, and not a recent production, may itself have been produced by God as misleading evidence to support the deception – and for or all we know God’s doing this may be a justified evil. Other evidence from other domains cited in defense of other claims may be similarly handled. Any evidence against deception may be brought in question as possibly being deceptive evidence, and no consideration of reason or experience advanced to defend against this skeptical onslaught can be considered immune to the onslaught itself. Thus is the skepticism of the skeptical theists drawn well beyond its intended religious domain, and here we see the global objection in fullest flower.<sup>8</sup>

To many, this may seem an unimportant response, being of a variety familiar from other examples of extreme skepticism, such as solipsism, brain-in-a-vat scenarios, and the like. It may be argued that *all* knowledge claims are subject already to varieties of self-reinforcing extreme skepticism, which we can do nothing to mitigate; even if skeptical theism does generate another instance of this sort of thing, it is not clear how much difference that makes to our cognitive situation. The general reaction of epistemologists to extreme skepticisms is to downplay their importance and construct theories with a view to addressing other kinds of problems. This Moorean, commonsensist approach, very appealing as regards extreme skepticism generally (and in part an expression of impatience at the hopelessness

7 On this point, see Bergmann (2001, 280–291 and 295, note 27); see also Wielenberg (2010, 514–516).

8 See Wilks (2009).

of responding to such extremes by any form of reasoned refutation), recommends itself as a response to the sorts of doubts just imputed to skeptical theism (see Chapter 29). Micheal Bergmann is a recent proponent. He characterizes commonsensism as the view

that (a) it is clear that we know many of the most obvious things we take ourselves to know (this includes the truth of simple perceptual, memory, introspective, mathematical, logical, and moral beliefs) and that (b) we also know (if we consider the question) that we are not in some skeptical scenario in which we are radically deceived in these beliefs. (Bergmann, forthcoming)

If one takes this view as a starting point, and then adds skeptical theism, Bergmann argues, the result will certainly suggest some limitation on what we can legitimately claim to know, but not so much limitation as to deny the verities set down in (a) and (b). To convey this point, he notes that a nontheist can affirm skepticism about limits on our knowledge of goods and evil just as readily as a theist can; if this happens, that nontheist is not going to be subject to any of the doubts raised by the global objection. So why should the theist be? The unacceptability of the skeptical extremes pinned on skeptical theism should appear equally obvious to both parties:

Notice how things are different when it comes to thinking about brains in vats. Both theists and non-theists can agree that it is perfectly reasonable to think you know, as a matter of common sense, that you have hands and also that you aren't a handless brain in a vat. It is perhaps not clear how you know you aren't a handless brain in a vat, but it is nevertheless reasonable to think that you know it, even if you think [skeptical theism is] true. (Bergmann, forthcoming)

So skeptical theism can and should be understood in a commonsensist vein as putting forward a limited skepticism, not a global one.<sup>9</sup>

But in the end it does not appear that the problems raised for skeptical theism by the global objection can be so easily mitigated. I believe the answer to Bergmann on these points lies in the intriguing comparison he himself raises between the nontheist who embraces skepticism over our knowledge of goods and evils and the theist who does the same. The nontheist who accepts the skeptical theist's theses indeed seems completely untouched by any of the skeptical extremes itemized above. But the case for the theist is different. Why the difference? It seems to lie in this, that *the theist acknowledges the existence of something actually capable of bringing extreme skeptical scenarios about, and the nontheist does not*. In the nontheist's understanding of the universe, there is nothing having this capability. In the theist's understanding, such a being has absolute centrality. So given a *theistic* belief set, the probability of there being something capable of inciting extreme deception is 1. But given a *nontheistic* belief set, what is the corresponding probability? It will be close to or equal to 0. To assess how implausible some scenario of extreme deception is, it should indeed make a difference whether one already believes in a being capable of performing miraculous, physical-law-suspending acts. If one does, then the scenario is

9 The compatibility of skeptical theism with commonsensism is contested in Dougherty (2008). Bergmann (forthcoming) replies. See Bergmann (2009, 367–381) for further discussion of the limitations, as he construes them, on skeptical theism's skepticism.

a lot less implausible. In that case, this fact becomes decisive: a being with such miraculous capability only needs to *will* the deception and that suffices to bring it about. Anyone who believes in such a being should regard extreme deception as implausible only to the extent that it would seem implausible for the being to will it.

In this way, the extreme skeptical scenario of divine deception is not really that remote from *theistic* belief systems – at any rate is significantly less remote than extreme skeptical scenarios are from *nontheistic* belief systems.<sup>10</sup> Of course, what keeps divine deception from becoming a live possibility for theists is precisely their conviction that they have insight into what it would be evil for God to do, and their conviction that he would not deceive because it would be evil for him to do so. So to those who regard the global objection as just another in a list of dime-a-dozen, extreme skeptical scenarios, the response is to note how unusual the theist's epistemic situation is, and how far removed it is from the one addressed by commonsensism. This extreme skeptical scenario comes close to being a live possibility for theists in a way that no such scenario does for nontheists. Beliefs that forestall such a scenario have actual utility for theists in a way that they do not for nontheists. And there is an onus on theists to be capable of addressing the possibility of extreme deception, where there is no similar one on nontheists, for whom a dose of commonsensism is quite enough.

In practice, this onus is borne by theists so easily that it never feels like an onus; God's perfection assures us that he would not be this kind of deceiver. Here, for example, is Descartes's brief expression of the point:

I can see the impossibility of God's ever deceiving me. Any fraud or deception involves imperfection; the ability to deceive may to some degree argue skill or power, but the will to deceive is a sign of malice or weakness, and so cannot occur in God. (Descartes 1966, 92–93)<sup>11</sup>

This is, I believe, a very typical theistic view. We can be assured that God is not a deceiver because deception would be a fraud or imperfection, and as such something that it would be evil for God to do. It is this view about God, not commonsensism or the like, that gives theists reason to remain unconcerned by the prospect of divine deception even though they believe in a being with the power to implement it. On this basis, the solution is so forthcoming, the problem so evanescent, that it is easy to forget that there really is a potential epistemic problem that really does get addressed. But this quick remedy is open only to the theist who is not a skeptical theist, only to someone who believes that we can indeed have insight into what it would be evil for God to do or permit. This insight might happen through the denial of the first thesis cited at the outset of this chapter; it might be thought that the evil of divine deception is identifiable by its internal character alone. Or the insight might happen through the denial of the second thesis; it might be thought that we have enough awareness of goods and evils to justify the view that divine deception could never

10 Now if some nontheists were to regard themselves as under the control of alien beings capable at will of planting delusions in their minds, delusions indistinguishable from reality, they would be in a predicament that would bring them closer to theists on this point; they would have good reason not to accept a given experience as non-delusory unless they had assurance that those beings were not exercising their power at the time of that experience. Of course, nontheists are in no comparable situation now, and have good reason not bother devoting much study to the epistemological challenges that such a situation would involve.

11 This passage is discussed in Wielenberg (2010, 516).



serve a greater good or offset a greater evil. Either way, the insight happens by denying one of the assumptions foundational to skeptical theism.

When skeptical theists discredit our capacity for insight into what it would be evil for God to do or permit, they embrace a position that undercuts the common belief that it would be evil for God to be a deceiver. I suspect that they are all typical theists of their tradition and hold that common belief too, in which case their viewpoint is in tension with itself. But I may be wrong, and they may actually decline to make the claim that it would be evil for God to be a deceiver. In that case, as the global argument attempts to show, their viewpoint is implicated in a skepticism of the extremest sort.

## Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Michael Bergmann for giving me access to his forthcoming paper on skeptical theism, and to two anonymous reviewers for detailed and very helpful remarks.

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# Theistic Objections to Skeptical Theism

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## The Evidential Argument from Evil

If God exists, why is there terrible suffering that seems utterly pointless? Often, the reason for wondering is that such terrible suffering, whether in particular instances or in general, does not seem to square with what we, believers or unbelievers, would expect in a world brought about or providentially sustained by God. There seems to be a big gap between reality and expectation. Emphasizing this apparent gap, antitheistic probabilistic arguments are prominent nowadays in the philosophical literature on God and evil. There are two main types of such arguments: one originally developed by William L. Rowe (see Chapter 4), the other, adapting a line of thought from Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, by Paul Draper (see Chapter 5). The former alone will figure in our discussion in this chapter.

Addressing only a restricted formulation of theism, namely, the proposition that “an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being exists,” and citing examples of some terrible and seemingly pointless evils, Rowe succinctly argues his case this way:

- (1) Probably, there are pointless evils (e.g., the suffering of a fawn, terribly burned in a forest fire started by lightning, dying a slow and agonizing death).
- (2) If God exists, there are no pointless evils.  
Therefore,
- (3) Probably, God does not exist (Rowe 2009, 381).

The first premise is crucial. What reason is there to think it is true? In essence, the reason Rowe gives is that “no good we know of (is known by us to justify) God in permitting many of the evils in our world . . .” (Rowe 2009, 388, note 8), which is to say that, “. . . it is extraordinarily difficult to think of, or even imagine, a greater good whose realization *we know* would require God to permit the fawn's terrible suffering” (Rowe 2009, 388, note 2,

italics original). Implicit in this is the assumption that, if there were a God-justifying reason or reasons, it is reasonable to think that we would at least have some inkling of it or them, and likewise for at least some of the many other instances of seemingly pointless suffering that could be cited. But, having none, Rowe concludes that, “probably no good justifies God in permitting those evils,” which is to say that, probably, they are not just seemingly pointless but truly pointless, and so, probably, there is no God (Rowe 2009, 386).

## Skeptical Theism

Some defenses against probabilistic arguments from evil use a skeptical premise (see Chapter 29). Of the two main kinds of skeptical defenses, the one I will discuss here is developed in more-or-less overlapping ways by Stephen J. Wykstra, William P. Alston, Michael Bergmann, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and Michael Rea, among others. Their more-or-less similar approaches to a skeptical defense overlap with, but are distinguishable from, Peter van Inwagen’s approach (see Chapter 27) – for example, his approach stresses certain objective indeterminacies, whereas Wykstra-style defenses do not – and our discussion here will not cover van Inwagen’s defense. Emphasizing certain cognitive limitations of human beings *vis-à-vis* God, if God exists, and on that basis alone, the approach of Wykstra and those of like mind on this issue questions whether it *is* reasonable to expect that we would likely discern or even conceive of the reasons that God might have for permitting or not preventing either whatever particular, seemingly pointless evils we might have in mind or the totality of seemingly pointless evils.

In Bergmann’s (2001, 279) formulation, the following conjunction is key: we have no good reason to think that the possible goods, evils, and “entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils” are, respectively, representative of the possible goods, evils, and such entailment relations that there are, and, we have no good reason to think that “the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have” (Rowe 2009, 379). In such defenses, our cognitive limitations relative to God are taken to be, in themselves, sufficient reason to accept the foregoing conjunction, so, for our discussion here, we need not bring in any other features of those defenses. I propose to accept for the sake of argument that this line of skeptical defense is successful against Rowe’s and Rowe-style probabilistic arguments for atheism. Parenthetically, Rowe himself acknowledges reduced confidence in his arguments because of such defenses (Rowe 2009, 386).

Some philosophers deploying skeptical defenses are theists. Let us call them skeptical theists. Focusing on them and on the kind of defense just sketched, I will attempt in this chapter to think through some implications that such a defense may have for the theism being defended. I propose to attempt this as a reflective, philosophically minded skeptical theist might. In essence, this attempted thinking-through models an exercise in faith seeking understanding.

## Problems for Beliefs about Sin and Morality

A supposition common among theists, although not only among theists, is that there is an important religious dimension to morality. One aspect of that supposed dimension is the

idea that religion contributes in important ways to recognizing and understanding moral goods, evils, situations, principles, and so on, as well as providing useful moral guidance, support, and reinforcement. Even Hume was prepared to go along with the support and reinforcement parts of the idea. The idea includes the supposition of a dimension of morality and of the moral sensibility missing from morality that does not invoke any religious ideas or beliefs, namely, the concept of doing or of trying to do the will of God and of avoiding or trying to avoid actions and situations believed to be either forbidden by God or displeasing to God, and of teaching others to do the same. A concept central to this view of morality is the concept of sin, that is, the concept of actions and kinds of actions that are morally impermissible in the eyes of God, morally impermissible all things considered.

Let us distinguish between two senses of “all things considered”: one, the restricted sense, reflects the perspective of us human beings, deliberating before a decision or action, taking into account all relevant things that a morally responsible human being can reasonably expect to be able to factor in; and two, the literal or unrestricted sense which reflects the perspective of an omniscient deity, if one exists. If there are logical limits on omniscience, then the unrestricted sense of “all things considered” will reflect that, but, as far as I can see, this qualification has no bearing on the distinction just made or on my argument here, so we can safely ignore it. Accordingly, the concept of sin – the concept of moral impermissibility to God – is the concept of moral impermissibility, all things unrestrictedly considered.

Clearly, religious and secular conceptions of morally permissible and impermissible actions and kinds of actions overlap, but they are not coextensive. There are actions and kinds of actions regarded as morally impermissible in nonreligious systems of morality and as sins by theists, for instance, unjustified killing of persons or animals, cruelty, torture, breaking serious promises without morally sufficient reasons, and so on. In such cases, to the theist there is an added dimension of moral wrongness, namely, the offense against God that the theist believes the person so behaving is committing. Then there are actions that may be sinful in the eyes of theists but that may or may not be morally impermissible in the eyes of people whose moral outlook is not religious, for example, abortion, adultery, blasphemy, and suicide. To many people whose morality is not connected to religion, the moral standing of such behavior will depend on other factors, for instance, whether unjustified harm is caused, while what some theists see as the “greatest sin” – “a self-centered refusal or failure to make God the center of one’s life” (Alston 1996, 104) – would very likely not come within the orbit of morality at all. Notwithstanding that, it is important not to overgeneralize in either direction: Aristotle, for one, saw adultery as inherently immoral, and there are theists who think that abortion or suicide, for example, are not wrong as such. Let us look now at the epistemic and moral situation of a reflective skeptical theist, ruminating on some of her core religious-*cum*-moral beliefs in the spirit of faith seeking understanding.

It has been objected against the kind of skeptical defense of theism under consideration here that it undermines practical morality (see Chapter 30). However, for our discussion, let us agree that such objections are unsuccessful and bypass the issue. Let us agree for the sake of discussion that, absent good-faith awareness of any defeaters of her thinking that, for instance, to help a young child being abducted is good as far as she can tell, our skeptical theist can be justifiably confident that helping the child is what she should do. But would helping the child be good all things unrestrictedly considered – good in the eyes of God?

Would not helping, without her having any good reason for not helping, be a sin? Is the abduction itself a sin? Would the savage rape, beating, and murder by strangulation of a five-year-old little girl be a sin, that is, morally impermissible in the eyes of God?

My argument in the remainder of this section is that, given our skeptical theist's belief that "... we have no good reason to think that what we know of ... [possible and actual goods, evils and the links between them] is representative of what there is to know about them" (Bergmann 2009, 379), we have no good reason to think that those, on our estimation, terrible evils just mentioned are sins. If this is right, then, on this form of defense, there is no good reason to think that, for us human beings, there is an unrestricted all-things-considered dimension to morality – no good reason to think that the moral domain for human beings extends beyond nonreligious morality. True, there is an unrestricted all-things-considered dimension to morality if God exists, but, if I am right, then, on skeptical theism, there is no good reason to think that our moral thinking or practices are representative of it.

But, against this, does not our skeptical theist, being a theist, believe that various actions and kinds of actions are expressly forbidden by God? Thus, presumably our skeptical theist believes that, for instance, homicide, theft, the so-called seven deadly sins, and so on are forbidden, all things considered unrestrictedly, while certain other actions and kinds of actions are prescribed, all things considered unrestrictedly – helping the sick and the poor, say. As Bergmann and Rea put it

... theists very typically believe that God has commanded his creatures to behave in certain ways; and they also very typically believe that God's commands provide all-things-considered reasons to act. Thus, a skeptical theist will very likely not find it the least bit plausible to think that ... [skeptical theism] leave[s] us without an all-things-considered reason to prevent harm to others in cases like the abduction scenario described. ... (Bergmann and Rhea 2005, 244)

I take it that, in the lines quoted, it is the unrestricted sense of "all things considered" that is meant, that the authors' point is that theists typically believe that, for instance, what they regard as God's "thou shalt not" commands are unrestrictedly forbidding certain actions as sins. The issue, then, is whether our skeptical theist has good reason to believe this. In the remainder of this section, I argue that she does not.

How might our skeptical theist think that God's commands become available to her and how might she support thinking that they "provide all-things-[unrestrictedly]-considered reasons to act"? Presumably, she thinks the answers in both cases will be either by way of personal revelation, church teaching, scripture, or her thinking her way to what Aquinas and others regard as precepts of the natural law. Let us consider these in turn.

Perhaps our skeptical theist thinks that through personal revelation, she has received divine commands to behave in certain ways. If so, the issue becomes that of her having good reason to take experiences purportedly of supernatural beings at face value. Being philosophically minded, she will likely be aware of serious reasons to hesitate before thinking that she does have good reason: for instance, wishful thinking, emotional need or projection, personification, as well as the suspicion-arousing fact that many people claiming to have revelation experiences interpret them exclusively in terms of the religion with which they are already familiar or to which they already belong. In addition, she will know of various, *prima facie* appalling actions carried out by people while supposedly inspired by personal experience of the voice or will of God, which, because of their *prima facie*

appallingness, she may plausibly believe are not reflective of God's will. And so, perhaps mindful of certain suicide bombers and of others promoting hatred or doing violence in the name of religion, as well as of her own skepticism regarding humans' cognitive or experiential access to the divine mind, if any, she may, plausibly, become less than quite confident about believing that her own purported revelation experiences are truly experiences of a divine being or of a supernatural surrogate.

Furthermore, our skeptical theist will recognize that she had or has to interpret the experiences in question and to apply the interpretations to circumstances. But, given her skepticism about supposing that possible goods, evils, and the entailment relations between them, as we are aware of those things, are representative of such things to God, it is only a small step to justifiably thinking that, by virtue of the same gap between human and divine cognition that drives her skepticism, she also has no good reason to think that how she interprets supposed experiences of, or communications from, God is representative of their meaning in the mind of God or of what God, if God is indeed their source, intends her to understand by them. Her cognitive limitations point seems to apply there no less than to possible goods and evils, and the entailment relations between them. If so, then her skepticism leaves her without good reason to think that her interpretations of such experiences are representative of God's intentions in communicating with her about morality, if God is communicating with her.

Perhaps she might appeal to church teachings about morality to support thinking that she has all-things-unrestrictedly-considered reasons to act. But if so, it would be unpersuasive, since church teachings themselves are pronouncements, interpretations of scripture, and so on by fallible, cognitively limited, human beings. And so are her own interpretations of scripture (see Chapter 30). Furthermore, what is scripture itself but writings by fallible, cognitively limited human beings? To dispute this by claiming that scripture is divinely inspired would take us back to the point in the previous paragraph about the trustworthiness, for skeptical theists, of supposed revelation experiences and their (now written) interpretations.

Our skeptical theist likely believes, with justification, that, in the abstract, homicide, theft, abduction, sexual abuse of children, and so on are morally wrong, and perhaps she believes this because she regards such behavior as violating the natural law. But, like the rest of us, presumably she believes, again with justification, that, when it comes to behavior, there are cases and cases and the details make a difference, as Judith Jarvis Thomson puts it. Thus, her acting with moral reasons that she may believe reflect either the natural law or a scriptural text, such as The Ten Commandments, or something taught by her church, means behaving some particular way in some particular situation, interpreted some particular way, with some intention, some conception of consequences, and so on; in other words, subject to our cognitive and other limitations and with the details making a difference. But it is a basic tenet of her skeptical defense that we have no good reason to suppose that actual or possible goods, evils, and the entailment relations between them, as we are aware or can conceive of them, are representative of such things to God, no matter how good and bad the goods and evils respectively are to us or how inconceivable to us a justification for certain actions and kinds of actions may be. So, on the basis of that, she has no good reason to think that, when it comes to the particular circumstances of a particular homicide, theft, abduction, or sexual abuse of a child, or even when it comes to considering such things in the abstract, how she or the rest of us may see them is representative of how they are in the eyes of God.



Among the details making a difference to an action's moral permissibility or impermissibility, and so to determining moral permissibility and impermissibility, are intentions and consequences. Our skeptical theist may plausibly believe that the long-term consequences of her own actions are as unknown to her as those of a stranger's. Consequences, then, tend to support the idea that we are not in a position to determine or grasp all-things-unrestrictedly-considered moral permissibility or impermissibility. But with that true, and even with its also being true that our skeptical theist has at best partial and indirect access to a stranger's intentions, motives, deliberations, and so on, does she not have full and direct access to her own, and is not this enough for knowing that some of her intentions or deliberations, vengeful or cruel ones, say, along with their corresponding actions, are sins?

To each of these two questions, there is a good reason to answer No, with the reason in the case of the second question being conclusive. First, for various reasons reflecting advances in the neurosciences that I have no space here to go into, our philosophically minded skeptical theist is unlikely to subscribe to a theory of full and transparent self-awareness, Descartes' for instance. Second, our intentions, motives, deliberations, and so on reflect our values, including our moral values, but, on skeptical theism, we have no good reason to think that our values, including our moral values, are representative of God's, if God exists. Thus, we have no good reason to think that our all-things-restrictedly-considered reasons are representative of any all-things-unrestrictedly-considered reasons there may be.

In sum, it seems to me that a philosophically minded, skeptical theist will find it plausible to think that the basic principles of her skepticism leave her without good reason for thinking that any actions are sins, no matter how awful those actions are in our estimation. If this is right, it suggests that our skeptical theist's religious moral concepts amount in principle to no more than nonreligious moral concepts, albeit decorated and expressed a certain way. And that, if right, calls into question her teaching others to think and speak in, and especially to act on, essentially religious terms in moral contexts, particularly the young and impressionable, assuming that she does teach others this, since it might be seriously prone to misleading them.

## Problems for the Theology of Divine Goodness

Presumably, our skeptical theist believes that God is an infinite person, who is infinitely good, omniscient, and omnipotent. Presumably, she also believes that God is the providential originator or sustainer of the universe, that God loves all creatures, that their lives, and the lives of all human beings especially, have an important place in God's plan for the universe.<sup>1</sup> In the mode of faith seeking understanding, our philosophically minded, skeptical theist endeavors to understand as best she can the infinite, personal deity in whom she believes.

Our skeptical theist believes God to be a person, albeit infinite, so thinking of the divine nature in terms analogous to human nature seems like a good place to start, all the more so since analogical thinking about God is well established in the theistic tradition. However, she will be mindful that the tradition cautions against pressing the analogy too hard.

<sup>1</sup> That those propositions are neither part of nor entailed by the restricted formulation of theism that Rowe discusses is of no consequence here, since they are not being used to defend theism.

Understanding human nature includes understanding human goodness and wickedness. A first, *prima facie* plausible thought regarding this mixture of good and bad in humans, then, is that an analogy between divinity and humanity might work better with some of the polytheistic gods than with the God of theism, or, among characterizations of that God, better with the God of the Hebrew Bible than with the God of the New Testament and subsequent Christian traditions.

Our skeptical theist likely considers moral goodness to be valuable and important, and she will have a reasonably good understanding of what the concept means, as well as a reasonably good ability, at least over time, to recognize moral goodness. Thus, being a reasonably good judge of moral goodness in human beings, it would be natural for our philosophically minded skeptical theist, now embarked on seeking better to understand the object of her faith, to reflect on those things that go into believing or judging that a human person is morally good. True, in the case of God, she probably will not expect to be judging that God is morally good, since judging, by its nature, involves assessing evidence and, given her recognition of our cognitive limitations *vis-à-vis* God, if God exists, she will recognize that she has no good reason to think that any evaluation of evidence or any judgment based on it that she might make would be in any way representative of the divine nature, divine goodness in particular. So, our skeptical theist will likely forego the idea of judging goodness in God and instead will examine her belief that God is good. As a point of reference for this distinction between believing and judging, let us take believing, without judging, that a human person is a good person. Perhaps we retain the belief from childhood or perhaps we subsequently accepted it on good authority. What are the necessary conditions of such belief?

Terence Penelhum offers guidance here. He argues that, for a person who has a moral code, thereby excluding young children, among others, my believing that somebody is a morally good person requires my believing him to be good according to the standards of moral goodness that I myself accept (Penelhum 1990, 74–78). This seems right. Suppose I am a nonrelativist in morality, living by a certain moral code, and I am told, by somebody who is known to me not to share my moral outlook, that you, a stranger to me, are a morally good person and also do not share my moral outlook. For me to believe what I am told about you, certain conditions must obtain; for instance, either my accepting your moral principles and standards myself as the right ones or my accepting the moral principles and standards of the person telling me about you, while also believing that those are the standards being applied to you. But if I do neither and remain both a nonrelativist and committed to my own moral outlook, then I cannot, consistent with my conception of moral goodness, believe what I am told about you. If I believe there is overlap between my conception and either yours or that applied to you by my informant, then, to that degree, I can reasonably think of you as morally good. But if I have no reason to think there is any significant overlap, then, while perhaps I can be noncommittal about your moral character, I cannot reasonably believe that you are a morally good person. Reasonableness aside, perhaps I can *believe* that you are a morally good person, but I am fooling myself if I think, without fudging or covertly sliding over to supposing that my standards *do* cover you, that I have any reason for, or, more important, any understanding of my belief, if I now believe you are a morally good person.

Let us apply this to our skeptical theist's belief that God is infinitely good, mindful, as Penelhum notes and as our skeptical theist will agree, that "[e]xtrapolating to the divine case is hazardous" (Penelhum 1990, 75). So applied, our skeptical theist, believing in the

goodness of God, seems to face a dilemma: either give up the basic tenet of her skeptical defense, namely, that we have no good reason to think that either our concepts or measures of goodness in human persons are representative of those applying to infinite, nonhuman persons, if any, or accept that she has no good reason to suppose she understands what she believes about divine goodness.

But perhaps there is less to this dilemma than meets the eye. After all, it is not very uncommon for us to believe things that we either have no good reason to think we understand or, even stronger, have good reason to think we do not understand, and there is no epistemic fault inherent in so doing. For instance, I believe that Andrew Wiles solved Fermat's Last Theorem, but I have no good reason to think I understand his solution and, indeed, have good reason to think I do not.<sup>2</sup> So, in like manner, cannot our skeptical theist mitigate the second horn of the dilemma and grasp it?

To see, let us dig a little deeper into my epistemic situation *vis-à-vis* Wiles' solution. Why do I believe that he solved the problem and what makes my belief reasonable? Well, I remember reading about it in the *New York Times* and in some other reputable publications. That is, I both came and continue to believe it on authority. As, presumably, in large part, does our skeptical theist regarding divine goodness. So we need to look into believing on authority things that we have no good reason to suppose we understand. Presumably, our skeptical theist will say that the authorities in her case are scripture, the spoken or written words of learned people, church teachings, and so on. At this point, the issue becomes one about the standards of a good authority and about those standards being my standards, the standards in such matters that I myself am prepared to accept.

In the case of my belief about Wiles, I both require and have good reason to believe that, somewhere in the chain of authority, there is someone who does understand his work and that my belief is tracking that at some acceptable degree of separation. And I believe and have good reason to believe that the standards for belief at all important links in that chain of authority are standards that I either do or would accept. But, in principle, that is not true of the chain of authority in the case of our skeptical theist's belief about divine goodness, since, from scripture writers to church authorities, to the spoken or written words of learned people, the chain of authority is a human chain all the way. But a fundamental tenet of our skeptical theist's skepticism is that none of us (authority or *hoi polloi*) has good reason to think that our ideas about, or our standards of, goodness, respectively, are representative of goodness as understood by infinite beings, if any. So, any appeal by our skeptical theist to the not very uncommon occurrence of our believing something without good reason to suppose we understand it, and remaining in good epistemic standing while doing so, does not apply to any infinite-being cases. This does not mean that our skeptical theist is now pressured to suspend belief in the goodness of God, as a quasi-fideist option is available, that is, believing that God is good while acknowledging that she has no

2 There is a degree of unavoidable vagueness here. My having no good reason to think I understand Wiles' solution does not entail that I do not or could not understand any proposition in it. And the same is likely true of many things I have no good reason to think I understand. So, not understanding something is compatible with having some understanding of it. The vagueness attaches to specifying the point at which some degree of understanding is insufficient for understanding something. As far as I can see, this vagueness has no bearing on our consideration of the Wiles example or the larger point I am using it to make.

good reason to think she understands the substance of the belief.<sup>3</sup> But it does mean that the foregoing, putative mitigation of the second horn of the dilemma is not available.

Furthermore, from her point that we have no good reason to think that our concepts, standards, or interpretations of moral goodness, moral evil, or their entailment relations are representative of such things in the minds of any infinite beings, our skeptical theist must acknowledge that she has no good reason to think that she would recognize divine goodness as goodness. For, in order to have good reason to think she would recognize moral goods to an infinite being as moral goods, she would need good reason to think that our human concepts or standards of goodness represent either divine goodness or God's concept of goodness, but that is the very thing her skepticism challenges.

Two possibilities open up here: (1) divine goodness is beyond our ken, but continuous with goodness in human persons, and (2) divine goodness is beyond our ken and not continuous with goodness in human persons. My impression is that many theists, perhaps including skeptical ones, think of the goodness of God in the former way, as so much more than human goodness but still of the same kind as human goodness. In this way of thinking, the "so much more" clause reflects acceptance of an analogy between goodness in and for finite, human persons and goodness in and for infinite, divine persons, that is, acceptance of the idea that human goodness is representative of divine goodness. But a skeptical theist has no good grounds for analogy here, regardless of how weak it might be claimed to be, thus no good reason to think that (1) rather than (2) is true. Indeed, on skeptical theism, there is no good reason to think that we could distinguish in practice between (1) and (2), and so no good reason for considering divine goodness as the exemplar of goodness for human beings.

Included in believing in the essential, infinite goodness of God is the belief that God has a morally sufficient reason to permit or not prevent seemingly pointless, terrible evils, so that, all things considered unrestrictedly, they are not pointless at all. We, with our stock of moral concepts, typically think of morally sufficient reasons in terms of balancing goods, outweighing goods, lives with great, seemingly pointless suffering in them being good overall, equal or greater evils prevented or mitigated with no better way of preventing or mitigating them being available, compensation or restitution to victims, and so on. There is no need here for us to choose among or to rank these kinds of morally sufficient reasons, as we understand them, for permitted or unprevented evils. It is enough that they are a representative sample of our thinking on such matters. But our skeptical theist has no good reason to think that any of these, or any others that she could list or even conceive of, are in any way representative of morally sufficient reasons to an infinite being. Furthermore, she has no good reason to think that, in any future, including any postmortem, personal existence she may believe in, she would recognize or appreciate or agree with the reasons and so on that God might have for permitting or not preventing seemingly pointless, terribly bad things, no more than she recognizes such reasons here and now. And this would apply to her own, seemingly pointless, suffering no less than to any other instances of seemingly pointless evils. After all, it is not a requirement of a person's own, overall well-being, no more than of an animal's, that it be grasped as such by the person herself.

3 Here, I differ with Draper (1996, 175). His denial that skeptical theism is a kind of fideism turns on thinking that general skepticism about human cognitive powers is a necessary condition of fideism, whereas my suggestion here reflects only implications of skeptical theism's own, nongeneral skepticism about human cognitive powers.

Perhaps our skeptical theist believes she has a personal relationship with God, a form of I-Thou relationship, to use Buber's term, which is something that is possible only between persons. Applied to a relationship that a human person believes herself to have with an infinite, divine person, the core of the application is an analogy to mutual, loving, respectful, sincere, authentic, caring, noncoercive, honest, enriching, and so on relationships between human persons. Analogy seems to be essential to even a minimal understanding of I-Thou relationships between human persons and God. But, on skeptical theism, it is hard to see how any such analogy, no matter how weak, could be used. For, by her own admission, the skeptical theist has no good reason to suppose that such interpersonal goods to us as love, care, respect, authenticity, sincerity, compassion, generosity, honesty, and so on are in any way representative of interpersonal goods to an infinite, incorporeal being. Recognizing this, it would not be at all unreasonable for our reflective skeptical theist to have second thoughts about the mutuality that she would have been supposing to be inherent in her believed, personal relationship with God. She may reasonably begin to wonder if what she has hitherto been taking for mutuality in the felt relationship may just be projection on her part, projection experienced by her as mutuality because of its being self-beneficial to experience it that way.<sup>4</sup>

All in all, then, with the skepticism in skeptical theism seemingly undermining substantive analogies<sup>5</sup> between human and divine personhood and human and divine goodness, our philosophically minded skeptical theist may, not unreasonably, find herself inclining to the idea that she has no good reason to think that the God of her faith is not in principle beyond the bounds of human conceivability.

Hume's Philo says in the *Dialogues*: "... we ought never imagine, that we comprehend the attributes of this divine Being" (Hume 1993, 44). My impression is that many theists, including skeptical ones, will think they believe this, but that, by a kind of double-entry bookkeeping, at the same time think that in some way, to some extent, by some analogy, they do comprehend or at least that they have no good reason to think they do not. But our philosophically minded skeptical theist will appreciate better than most that her skepticism seems to undermine all substantive analogies between finite humans and infinite deity.

## Problems for Natural Theology

An idea long associated with the theistic tradition is that theism makes a unique and valuable contribution to "a question whose importance cannot be exaggerated – the question of what explains the existence and character of the astounding natural order we can observe in the universe we inhabit" (Nagel 2010, 20). In essence, the theistic contribution is its idea of an ultimate, supernatural, personal source and sustainer of the universe, if the universe had an origin, and its idea of the universe's being sustained in existence by such a being, if it did not. It seems natural for a philosophically minded skeptical theist, in the spirit of faith seeking understanding, to wonder about the implications, if any, that the skepticism

4 See Kail on this kind of projection, called by him "explanatory projection," (Kail 2007, xxix). See Gale on implications of skeptical defenses for the theistic idea of valuable, personal relationships between believers and God (Gale 1996, 210).

5 In contrast to such nonsubstantive analogies as, say, that God and humans are analogous in not being simultaneously round and square all over.

in skeptical theism might have for the traditional supposition that theism is a valuable contributor to humanity's effort to answer this important question.

Often, theism's contribution takes the form of a natural theology, that is, either arguments that various facts in or about the physical universe are inexplicable without the theory that God is behind them or arguments that, among putative explanations of those facts, the best is that they are due to God. In essence, then, the natural-theology project is an attempt to go from reflection on agreed facts in or about the physical universe to the conclusion that God is behind them, thus that God exists. But, with Bergmann (2009, 389) and perhaps Alston (1996, 224, note 37) conceding that the skepticism in their kind of defense undermines the natural-theology project, there is no need to argue here for that undermining or that it represents a steep cost to skeptical theism.

But the natural-theology project is not the only way to think about the creator or designer clauses in the theistic concept of God. Nor is there reason to assume that our skeptical theist, thinking about those clauses in the mode of faith seeking understanding, is seeking evidence to support the belief or proposition that God exists. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume it from the fact that she herself offers evidence in defense of that proposition.

Natural-theological theories of supernatural agency are as much about reasons and intentions as about causes or sources. But, in the setting of the natural-theology project, the supposed reasons and intentions are not of primary importance. For example, take the fact that conditions at the Big Bang were what they were and that the laws of nature are what they are, and the explanation of those things on a natural-theological theory, namely, uncaused, supernatural, agent causation. The question about *why* the putative, supernatural agent would have chosen or brought about those initial conditions and those laws would likely come up, but its having a good answer is not essential to the cogency or persuasiveness of those natural-theological explanations themselves. For analogy, suppose that Sherlock Holmes infers from the grip size of my tennis racket, a folded train ticket, mud on my left shoe, and so on that I am the burglar, but that, in a rare deviation from his usual form, achieves no insight into my motivation for the crime. His case for my guilt still may be completely convincing to Inspector Lestrade, notwithstanding the absence of an answer to why I did it.

But the same would not be true in the faith-seeking-understanding approach to the existence of the universe, conditions at the Big Bang, the laws of nature, natural order, and so on. For, in that non-natural-theological, nonevidentialist, kind of approach, the intentions and reasons are the things of primary significance; the focus is on "why?" In the context of faith seeking understanding,<sup>6</sup> it is the religious meaning or significance of the creation or design theories that matters. And that has to do essentially with why God would have created or designed the universe, not with whether God created or designed it.

To come at the same distinction another way, suppose that deism is true and theism false. Suppose the deism in question is the theory of an omnipotent, omniscient, nonmoral, nonprovidential, supernatural, personal being whose causal agency is the most plausible explanation of the existence and so on of the universe. This deism is not a religious hypothesis in any way that a religious hypothesis would matter to a believer. In it, there is no basis

6 True, Anselm understood his argument for the existence of God to belong to faith's search for understanding, but I am suggesting that arguments for God's existence need not be viewed that way.

for worship or prayer, or for supposing the first cause to be a moral exemplar or of caring about us, and so on. Yet supposing this deism true and theism not, it would satisfactorily explain the existence and so on of the physical universe. But, as Hume's Cleanthes asks: "... to what purpose establish the natural attributes of the Deity, while the moral are still doubtful and uncertain?" (Hume 1993, 101). Or, removing Cleanthes' point from its natural-theological context, to what religious purpose believe in or value the natural attributes without the moral?

Now back to our skeptical theist. She will be familiar from her own case, as well as from experiences with other people and with certain animals, with reasons for doing or attempting things and with intentions in doing or attempting them. Typically, our reasons and intentions reflect our values, goals, understanding of means–ends relationships, and so on. Seeking understanding of the creator and designer clauses in her concept of God, it seems plausible to suppose that she might look to how it is with herself and others doing things with reasons or intentions, in order to find insight into God's reasons and intentions in bringing about or sustaining the physical universe, supposing that God did or does. But, on her skeptical defense, she has no good reason to think that all the values and so on reflected in acting with reasons or intentions to us represent all or any of the values reflected in acting with reasons or intentions to an infinite being. That is, she has no good reason to suppose that any way of thinking about them that makes sense to her or to anybody else is representative of how things stand with God. Perhaps she might think that she could understand either God's reasons or intentions, or what having reasons or intentions is to God, without relying on any analogy to humans or animals having reasons or intentions. But if she blanks out all of that, what could it possibly mean to suppose she understands an infinite being's having or acting with reasons or intentions?

In sum, our skeptical theist's having no good reason to think she understands either God's reasons or intentions or what the very having of reasons or intentions would be to God undercuts the non-natural-theological project described earlier.

## Problems for Belief in Miracles

Revelation is a pillar of the theistic religions, and miracle reports are an important part of revelation. For purposes of our discussion, I am going to characterize a miracle as an occurrence that violates a law of nature that is due to God and that serves an overall good purpose. Like the first two characteristics, the third will be contested, but I add it to reflect a view that, as far as I can tell, is very common among theists who believe in miracles. Let us suppose for the sake of discussion that our skeptical theist is such a theist, that she accepts the foregoing characterization of a miracle, and that her search for understanding now turns to that belief.

Our grasp of the laws of nature traces to experiences, interpretations, and descriptions of patterns of occurrences in the physical universe, and our philosophically minded skeptical theist knows this. But, given our cognitive limitations *vis-à-vis* God, if God exists, we have no good reason to think that our interpretations or descriptions of natural occurrences are representative of God's true and unrestricted, all-things-considered interpretations or descriptions of them, thus no good reason to think that what our best science calls laws of nature truly are laws of nature – laws of nature in the unrestricted all-things-considered sense. This does not imply that our skeptical theist should now be a philosophical



skeptic in her daily life or in her scientific work, no more than the earlier point about sin should make her a moral ditherer in day-to-day life. After all, she likely knows of the admitted, inherent fallibility of science, of the history of revisions and abandonments both of scientific theories and of once-upon-a-time, supposed laws of nature, but none of that does (I presume) or should make her tentative about gravity, say, or the liquidity of water, and so on. "Laws of nature" understood in the restricted all-things-considered sense of the term is good enough for daily life, including scientific work.

On skeptical theism, there is no good reason to think that goods, as understood by us, are goods in the unrestricted all things considered sense, thus no good reason to think that good purposes to us in purported miracles are good purposes in that unrestricted sense. Accordingly, for that reason, too, on the understanding of miracles that seems to be common among theists who believe in miracles, our skeptical theist has no good reason to believe that reports of certain, alleged occurrences are genuine miracle reports.

Perhaps our skeptical theist might attempt to ward off this potential extension of her skepticism to miracle reports by claiming that her skepticism is restricted to considerations about possible goods and evils. But, absent a principled reason, the attempt looks *ad hoc*, since, first, it is just the skeptical theist's own, claimed gap between human and divine cognition that is driving the extension to miracle reports; second, my description of the concept of a miracle includes a goodness clause that reflects a widely held theistic view; and third, we have Bergmann's (and perhaps Alston's) concession that it already extends to natural theology.

What does it mean for the epistemic standing of miracle reports that skeptical theism's skepticism seems to extend to them? It does not mean anything at all insofar as the alleged occurrence of certain events is concerned, alleged resurrections from the dead, curings of the blind, partings of seas, and so on. Its import is at the level of interpreting such alleged occurrences as miracles. To be justified in so interpreting them, our skeptical theist must be justified in thinking that, all things considered unrestrictedly, they violate laws of nature, they are due to God, and serve an all-things-unrestrictedly-considered good purpose. But, on her own skepticism, their seeming to us to be any of those things is insufficient to warrant that interpretation.

## Conclusion

The focus in my arguments here is entirely on some ramifications that our skeptical theist's skepticism may plausibly be thought to have for certain core theistic ideas that she likely accepts: the extensions for which I have argued are all intratheistic extensions.

In light of the various points we have been thinking about in this chapter, it seems that our skeptical theist's journey of faith seeking understanding is leading her to a recognition that, on her skeptical defense, she has no good reason to think that certain of her core beliefs, for example, that certain kinds of actions are sins, are true or justifiably believed, or that she understands certain key terms when she uses them about God, "goodness" for instance.

As noted, it is not in principle an epistemic shortcoming to believe something without reason to think we understand it. But many theists, perhaps our skeptical theist among them, do not just have beliefs about God as infinitely good, worshipful, and so on; they *do* worship God and dedicate their lives accordingly. In light of the extensions of the skepticism

in Wykstra-style defenses that we have been discussing, our skeptical theist, not unreasonably, might now experience some cognitive or affective dissonance in dedicating her life to a being, if that being exists, when she has no good reason to think that she understands the species-specific attributes of that being that are key to worship and to any such dedication, infinite goodness especially, possibly now seeing her dedication as more of a Kierkegaardian leap than she may have thought.

## Acknowledgment

I thank two anonymous readers for their useful comments.

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# Skeptical Theism and the “Too Much Skepticism” Objection

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The recent literature on the problem of evil has focused on two kinds of “apparently gratuitous suffering”: that of nonhuman animals dying alone and in great pain, and that of children victimized by various forms of abuse.<sup>1</sup> Suffering like this does not seem to have any point, or purpose. It is hard to imagine how an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly loving being could be justified in allowing such suffering. It is hard to imagine how the cost of preventing it might be the loss of some important greater good or the permission of something equally bad or worse. Consequently, it is widely held that reflection on suffering like this provides evidence that some of the suffering in our world is gratuitous.

We do not have to turn to the extreme sufferings of children and animals to find fodder for discussion, however. Most people, even as adults, have experienced suffering that does not seem to have any justifying purpose. Even if we can sometimes see great goods that have come out of our sufferings, none of us, I submit, can see with clarity that there are goods both great enough and strongly connected enough to our sufferings to justify an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good and loving being in permitting every single moment of every painful experience that we have ever endured as adults. Suffering that does not seem to serve any suitably greater good is ubiquitous.

Let us assume that all suffering is intrinsically evil, even if it contributes to great goods. Let us say that an evil is gratuitous if, and only if, there is no God-justifying reason for permitting it. Let us furthermore assume that there is a God-justifying reason for permitting some evil only if there is a good to which it contributes such that its contribution to that good would suffice to justify an all powerful, all knowing, perfectly good and loving being in permitting the evil. Finally, let us assume that *avoiding evils equally bad or worse* might be among the goods to which an evil contributes.<sup>2</sup> Let E be the proposition *that our*

1 I put “apparently gratuitous suffering” in scare quotes because part of what is contested in this debate is precisely the claim that the suffering in question *appears* to be gratuitous (cf. Wykstra 1984).

2 These are standard assumptions in the literature. I am not sure that I wish to endorse all of them, but taking issue with them here would unnecessarily complicate the discussion.

*world contains gratuitous evil.* There are, then, two ways in which reflection on an instance of suffering might support E. (a) Perhaps we can just see directly that the suffering in question is gratuitous, without even bothering to speculate about what sorts of goods might justify it.<sup>3</sup> (b) Perhaps, after speculating about what sorts of goods might justify it, we can justifiably infer from our failure to detect a God-justifying good that the suffering is, or is probably, gratuitous.

There are several well-trodden routes from the claim that E is probably true or that we have evidence sufficient to justify belief that E is true to the conclusion that there is no God. Following standard convention, let us call these arguments, collectively, the "evidential problem of evil." Skeptical theism is a response to the evidential problem of evil which opposes both (a) and (b). There are two components to skeptical theism: theism and a skeptical thesis. Insofar as the skeptical thesis is separable from theism, the skeptical theist's *strategy* for addressing the evidential problem of evil – namely, endorsement of the skeptical component – can be adopted by theists and nontheists alike (cf. Bergmann 2009, 375).

As I shall characterize it, the central skeptical thesis of skeptical theism – the view that skeptical theism puts forth (at any given time) as a response to the evidential problem of evil – is this:

(ST): No human being is justified (or warranted, or reasonable) in thinking the following about any evil *e* that has ever occurred: there is (or is probably) no reason that could justify God in permitting *e*.<sup>4</sup>

ST leaves open the possibility that an evil might someday occur about which we can justifiably think that it is gratuitous.<sup>5</sup> Obviously enough, however, any decently principled defense of ST will imply that, if the world carries on pretty much as it has to date, with more or less the same sorts of evils continuing to occur, human beings will never be in a position to think justifiably about some evil that it is gratuitous.

The most prominent objection against skeptical theism is that the skeptical theses typically adduced in support of ST have ramifications that range far more widely than skeptical theists hope or should tolerate: they lead to skepticism about various aspects of common-sense morality, about divine honesty and goodness, about the evidential value of religious experience, and much else besides. There are, in the literature, multiple ways of defending this objection. My view is that none is successful. I do not, however, see any way of establishing that conclusion outright – that is, without considering and responding to each particular defense on its own terms. Since space limitations preclude me from attempting to take them all on at once, I shall restrict my focus to the (multiple and various) defenses

3 Cf. Dougherty (2008, especially section III) and Gellman (1992).

4 I assume (for ease of exposition) that the variable "*e*" ranges over aggregates of evils – for example, the murder of twelve innocent victims, say, or even all the evil that has ever occurred – as well as individual evils. ST implies that skeptical theism is a view whose precise content changes over time (as new evils are added to the history of the world). Still, I think it is faithful to what skeptical theists actually say in response to the evidential problem. Note, too, that ST could, in principle, be accepted by someone who takes herself to be in possession of a theodicy. Whether a theodicy is available is one question; whether anyone is in fact justified in thinking of some actual evil that it is probably gratuitous is a wholly separate question.

5 Henceforth, for convenience, I use "justifiably" to mean "justifiably, warrantedly, or reasonably."

of this objection that appear in Chapters 30–32 of the present volume (i.e., the chapters by Stephen Maitzen, Ian Wilks, and David O'Connor). Several of my replies will apply to similar arguments that have appeared elsewhere in the literature; but I do not pretend that anything I say here will lay *all* defenses of the objection to rest.

My chapter unfolds as follows. In the first section, I characterize skeptical theism more fully. This is necessary in order to address some important misconceptions and mischaracterizations that appear in the essays by Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor. In the second section, I describe the most important objections they raise and group them into four "families" so as to facilitate an orderly series of responses. In the four sections that follow, I respond to the objections.

## What Is Skeptical Theism?

Skeptical theism has been characterized in various different ways. Let me begin with three examples.

In the article that introduced the term "skeptical theist," Paul Draper (1996) suggests (without offering an explicit definition) that a skeptical theist is someone who invokes a limited skeptical thesis in order to defend theism against the evidential problem of evil. The two theses under discussion in his article are these:

- ST1<sub>D</sub>: Humans are in no position to judge directly that an omnipotent and omniscient being would be unlikely to have a morally sufficient reason to permit the evils we find in the world.
- ST2<sub>D</sub>: Humans are in no position to compare theism's ability to explain certain facts about good or evil to some other hypothesis's ability to explain those facts.

In his contribution on the topic to the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, Michael Bergmann offers a somewhat different characterization. He describes skeptical theism as a view with two components: theism and a skeptical component. The latter, he says, is:

... best explained as an endorsement of some skeptical theses, among which these three are prominent:

- [ST1<sub>B</sub>] We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
  - [ST2<sub>B</sub>] We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
  - [ST3<sub>B</sub>] We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.
- (Bergmann 2009, 376)

ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub> might plausibly be thought to lend support to ST1<sub>D</sub> and ST2<sub>D</sub>, but the former are neither individually nor jointly equivalent to either the latter, or to their conjunction.

In his contribution on this topic to the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Justin McBrayer (2010) characterizes skeptical theism as theism plus the following thesis:

- ST1<sub>M</sub> We should be skeptical of our ability to discern God’s reasons for acting or refraining from acting in any particular instance. In particular . . . we should not grant that *our* inability to think of a good reason for doing or allowing something is indicative of whether or not *God* might have a good reason for doing or allowing something.

Again, Bergmann’s skeptical theses and Draper’s might be thought to lend support to ST1<sub>M</sub>. But McBrayer’s thesis is not equivalent to any of those others, nor is it equivalent to a conjunction of any of them. These are by no means the only characterizations of skeptical theism in the literature either.

So experts diverge to some extent on the question as to what, exactly, skeptical theism is. Moreover, neither Draper, Bergmann, nor McBrayer has identified a thesis to which *all* skeptical theists as such can be expected to agree and with which all opponents of skeptical theism can be expected to disagree. For example, I count myself a skeptical theist, but I reject ST1<sub>M</sub> because I think that we do have ways of discerning God’s reasons for acting on some particular occasions. (Scripture, e.g., tells us that one of God’s reasons for becoming incarnate was love for the world.) Similarly, it is easy to imagine a skeptical theist accepting some of the theses, ST1<sub>D</sub>, ST2<sub>D</sub>, and ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub>, without accepting all of them. It is also easy to imagine someone accepting (say) ST2<sub>D</sub> or ST1<sub>B</sub> while at the same time maintaining (in opposition to skeptical theism) that we can *see* directly that certain evils are gratuitous. By contrast, my own characterization offers a thesis (namely, ST) to which all skeptical theists will agree and with which all opponents of skeptical theism will disagree.

Maitzen, Wilks, and O’Connor all focus on ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub> as somehow lying at the heart of skeptical theism. I will concede this for the sake of argument. But, in light of the foregoing, I think that it is more accurate to think of them as comprising an important part of a typical *defense* of skeptical theism rather than to take their conjunction as *part* of skeptical theism. But let us set this quibble aside for now. Even having done so, it seems that all three authors are laboring under serious (albeit, in some cases, rather common) misconceptions as to the nature of skeptical theism. I will single out four for consideration.

First: Maitzen (Chapter 30) says that ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub> are “couched in broadly consequentialist terms, or at least they presuppose justifications couched in those terms” (Maitzen 2013, 449). He talks on the same page about the “strongly consequentialist flavor” of ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub>. Nor is he alone in making this association. Wilks also associates skeptical theism with consequentialism, though instead of finding it in ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub>, he declares it to be a thesis that operates “in the background” (Wilks 2013, 458). But these claims are mistaken. The only hint of consequentialism in either skeptical theism itself or in ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub> is the supposition that consequences are sometimes relevant to the moral status of an action. But, as Michael Bergmann argues (ironically, in a paper with which both Wilks and Maitzen are evidently familiar), “non-consequentialist ethical theories have no trouble allowing for considerations of consequences to play a role in moral decision-making” (Bergmann 2009, 380).

Second: According to Wilks (Chapter 31), skeptical theism is a “stalemating technique” whose “aim is to establish a confounding factor against the evidence of evil, and make that evidence inadmissible in debate over the existence of God” (Wilks 2013, 458). Note first that Wilks’s characterization of skeptical theism as a “stalemating technique” uncharitably implies that the skeptical theist, as such, has abandoned the pursuit of truth in favor of simply stalling discussion. It also confuses *replying to someone’s argument* with *trying to end the debate with neither party having “won.”* More importantly, this characterization reflects confusion about the aims and content of skeptical theism. Skeptical theism does not deny of any

*actual evidence* that it is admissible. Moreover, depending on one's views about the nature of evidence, skeptical theists might even be happy to concede that reflection on certain kinds of suffering does, after all, provide evidence that our world contains gratuitous evil, albeit highly defeasible evidence. What the skeptical theist denies is that our awareness of (or reflection on) any actual or hypothetical instance of evil constitutes *evidence sufficient to justify* belief that our world contains gratuitous evil.

Third: Wilks also claims that the “core of skeptical theism” is “the thesis that we may not be aware of all the goods and evils there are, so we may not always be able to discern the reasons that justify God’s actions and permissions” (Wilks 2013, 458). He seems, furthermore, to think that this thesis implies that “[w]e should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do or permit” (Wilks 2013, 458). Again, there are problems on multiple fronts. Skeptical theism is a controversial thesis, but the thesis that Wilks calls the *core* of skeptical theism is a platitude that should be affirmed by anyone. It is platitudinous that we human beings *may* not be aware of all of the various types (or tokens) of goods and evils there are; it is likewise platitudinous that we *may not always* be able to discern the reasons that would justify a divine being’s actions and permissions. More importantly, it does not follow from these obvious truths – nor must skeptical theists affirm – that we should be skeptical about *any* claim to know what would be evil for God to do or permit. Most of us, skeptical theists included, think that it would be evil for God to do the following: *permit horrendous suffering for absolutely no reason whatsoever*. Indeed, if the skeptical theist had reason to doubt this claim, she would likely have a different reply to the evidential problem of evil. Nor is there any obstacle to a skeptical theist affirming (say) that it would be evil for God to permit a hundred people to be burned alive in a furnace just so that another person could enjoy the pleasure of a warm bath.

Fourth: In O’Connor’s essay (Chapter 32), we find the striking claim that it is a “basic tenet” of skeptical theism “that we have no good reason to think that either our concepts or measures of goodness in human persons are representative of those applying to infinite, non-human persons” (O’Connor 2013, 474). I assume that this is simply a failed paraphrase of ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub>. If it is not, then I cannot see why he would attribute it to a skeptical theist. But it is important to see *why* it fails as a paraphrase. ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub> claim that we have no good reason to think that our *sample* of possible goods, possible evils, and the relations among them is representative with respect to the property of being apt for justifying God’s permission of evil. They do not claim (or imply) that our *concepts and measures* of goodness fail to represent (or be a representative sample of) the concepts and measures of goodness that apply to infinite, nonhuman persons. Goods and evils are one thing; concepts and measures of good and evil are another. The claim that O’Connor puts in the mouth of a skeptical theist is far more radical than what the skeptical theist herself affirms.

## The Too-Much-Skepticism Objection

We are now ready to consider the too-much-skepticism objection. The core objection, again, is that the skeptical theist’s skepticism is infectious – it ramifies throughout her belief system, undermining a wide variety of beliefs about God, value, and other matters. Maitzen, Wilks, and O’Connor each defend this core general objection by arguing for some more specific version of it. Skeptical theism is the nominal target of the objection; but in the chapters by Maitzen, Wilks, and O’Connor, it seems that the real target is something more



in the neighborhood of  $ST1_B$ – $ST3_B$ . As noted earlier, I will concede for the sake of argument that an attack on  $ST1_B$ – $ST3_B$  amounts to an attack on skeptical theism itself; but we should bear in mind that strictly speaking, it is not skeptical theism that is the target of these essays but these other theses instead.

The most important objections presented in the essays by Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor are sensibly grouped into four families, as follows:

### Global Skepticism

- (A) Skeptical theism “is implicated in skepticism of the extremist sort,” posing “a general problem about the possibility of knowing anything at all” (Wilks 2013, 466, 459; cf. Maitzen 2013, 446–447).

### Skepticism about Divine Commands and Values

- (B) Skeptical theism implies that “we have no good reason to think that [terrible evils like the abduction, brutalization, and murder of a child] are sins” (O'Connor 2013, 470).
- (C) Skeptical theists have no good reason for believing that “what they regard as God’s ‘thou shalt not’ commands are unrestrictedly forbidding certain actions as sins” (O'Connor 2013, 470).
- (D) Skeptical theists cannot take themselves to be able to “identify God’s commands, resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to [their] actual circumstances” (Maitzen 2013, 451).
- (E) Skeptical theism induces doubt about divine goodness and about our understanding of divine values (Maitzen 2013, 453; O'Connor 2013, 471–472).

### Skepticism about (Other) Knowledge of God

- (F) Skeptical theism undermines our ability to “[take] particular goods as signs of God’s presence,” and to “[see] things and events in the world around us as manifestations of God” (Wilks 2013, 460).
- (G) Skeptical theism undermines the belief that human suffering is *not* gratuitous. (O'Connor 2013, 453–454)
- (H) Skeptical theism precludes the warranted attribution of divine purposes to mundane events, thereby undermining belief in miracles and certain natural theological arguments (O'Connor 2013, 478–479).

### Skepticism about Our Obligation to Prevent Harm

- (I) Skeptical theism leads to skepticism about our *obligation to prevent harm*, and so it also leads to a kind of moral paralysis (Maitzen 2013, 451–453).

In the next four sections, I will present the reasons given by Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor for thinking that theses (A)–(I) are true. My ultimate conclusion will be that none of these claims has been shown to be true and so the different versions of the too-much-skepticism objection as defended by Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor, are failures.

## Global Skepticism

Let us begin with the global skepticism objection (Chapter 31). This is by far the most ambitious of the objections. But as Wilks has formulated it, there is some question as to

what exactly the objection is supposed to be. What does it mean to say that skeptical theism is “implicated” in an extreme form of skepticism? What does it mean to say that skeptical theism poses “a general problem about the possibility of knowing anything at all?” Here are some possibilities, none equivalent to the others:

- (i) Endorsing skeptical theism automatically provides one with an undefeated defeater for all of one’s beliefs.
- (ii) Endorsing skeptical theism automatically provides one with an undefeated defeater for most of one’s beliefs.
- (iii) Skeptical theism implies that every person (whether a proponent of skeptical theism or not) has an undefeated defeater for most of his or her beliefs.
- (iv) Proponents of skeptical theism who reflect rationally on its content and consequences have an undefeated defeater for most of their beliefs.

There are others we might add to the list as well.

Maitzen gestures at a similar objection, but he likewise refrains from stating it outright. Instead, what one finds in his chapter are remarks like “skeptical theism implies radical skepticism” (Maitzen 2013, 446) – a claim which he attributes to Bruce Russell (1996) and then goes on to defend without restating – and “theism threatens our knowledge” (Maitzen 2013, 447). My guess is that both Maitzen and Wilks are getting at something like (iv), which I will henceforth refer to by the label “SKEPTICISM.” The objection I take them to be raising, then, is simply that SKEPTICISM is true.

Wilks provides the most detailed argument for the claim that skeptical theists are stuck with some kind of radical skepticism. What follows is my best attempt at charitable and faithful reconstruction (treating SKEPTICISM as the intended conclusion).

Let “DH” be the “Deception Hypothesis” – the hypothesis that we have come to be deceived (either by divine design or divine permission) in systematic and comprehensive ways. Let “reflective skeptical theists” be just those skeptical theists who have rationally reflected on the content and consequences of skeptical theism. Then:

- 3.0. If skeptical theism is true, then God exists.
- 3.1. If God exists, then God has the power to bring it about that DH is true.
- 3.2. If 3.0 and 3.1 are true, then reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally deny that God exists and has the power to bring it about that DH is true.
- 3.3. Therefore, reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally deny that God exists and has the power to bring it about that DH is true. (From 3.0–3.2.)
- 3.4. Reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally affirm that it would be evil for God to bring it about that DH is true.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> According to Wilks, skeptical theism implies that we “should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do” (Wilks 2013, 458, 461). It is only by supporting something like 3.4 that this remark is of relevance to Wilks’s ultimate conclusion. So that is why I take 3.4 to be part of Wilks’s argument. It is perhaps worth noting that this claim is also of relevance to 3.1. For if one could know that it is evil for God to bring about the truth of DH, then one would have reason to deny that God is *able* to bring about the truth of DH, and, on some ways of understanding the relation between divine ability and divine power, this would imply that God lacks the power to bring about the truth of DH. Obviously, questions about the nature of omnipotence would then arise; but pursuing that issue would take us too far afield.

- 3.5. If one can neither rationally deny that God exists and has the power to bring it about that DH is true nor rationally affirm that it would be evil for God to bring it about that DH is true, then one cannot rationally dismiss DH as impossible.
- 3.6. Therefore: Reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally dismiss DH as impossible. (From 3.3–3.5.)
- 3.7. If skeptical theism is true, it is not absolutely unreasonable to believe that God has brought it about that DH is true for some justifying reason beyond our ken.<sup>7</sup>
- 3.8. If 3.7 is true, then reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally dismiss DH as absolutely unreasonable to believe.
- 3.9. If skeptical theism is true, then one cannot rationally dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true.
- 3.10. If 3.9 is true, then reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true.
- 3.11. Therefore, Reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally dismiss DH as absolutely unreasonable to believe, nor can they dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true. (From 3.7–3.10.)
- 3.12. Citing evidence against DH presupposes the falsity of DH (since any proposition that might be cited as evidence against DH will be a proposition about which we might be deceived).
- 3.13. If one cannot rationally dismiss DH as impossible or absolutely unreasonable to believe, and if one cannot rationally dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true, and if citing evidence against DH presupposes the falsity of DH, then one has a defeater for most of one's beliefs.
- 3.14. Therefore: Reflective skeptical theists have an undefeated defeater for most of their beliefs. (From 3.6, 3.11–3.13.)

7 By “absolutely unreasonable” I mean “unreasonable for any subject, regardless of what else she may believe.” So, to cast 3.7 in other terms: if skeptical theism is true, then it is at least possible for someone reasonably to believe DH. I attribute 3.7 to Wilks because he invokes the following premise from Bruce Russell *en route* to his conclusion:

- 3.7a. “If it is not reasonable to believe that God [has] deceived us, for some reason beyond our ken [with respect to the age of the universe], it is not reasonable to believe that there is some reason beyond our ken which, if God exists, would justify him in allowing all the suffering we see” (Wilks 2013, 462; cf. Russell 1996, 197).

As Wilks goes on to observe, there is nothing special about the age of the universe: one might replace “the age of the universe” in the antecedent with just about any proposition about which it is possible for us to be deceived. Moreover, he seems to think that skeptical theism commits one to rejecting the consequent of 3.7a. (We might question this. But never mind that for now.) Given this, skeptical theism implies, for any proposition *p* about which human beings can be deceived:

- 3.7b. It is false that it is not reasonable to believe that God has deceived us with respect to *p*.

This does not imply that it is *reasonable for us* to believe that God has deceived us with respect to *p*. What follows is just that it is *not absolutely unreasonable* to believe that we are so deceived. If that is true, then 3.7 is true.

As I have reconstructed it, the argument is valid. Thus, I shall focus my critical remarks on the premises – specifically, premises 3.4, 3.7, 3.9, and 3.13. Before turning to criticism, however, I wish to make two preliminary observations.

First, premises 3.7, 3.9, and 3.13 employ the notion of justifying reasons. I have employed this notion because Wilks does so in his own presentation of the argument (cf. note 6). But we should bear in mind that doing so represents a subtle shift in the topic of conversation. ST and ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub> are all theses about what human beings can justifiably believe about the space of possible goods and evils. Goods and evils are interestingly connected with reasons, but it is controversial at best to identify them with reasons. According to some philosophers, for example, to call something a reason for action is to say something about its relationship to the relevant agent's motivational structure; but calling something a good does not necessarily carry such implications. The significance of this fact in the present context is just this: There seems to be very good reason for thinking that skeptical theism implies that we cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that there is some good capable of justifying God in bringing about DH. But, by virtue of the difference between justifying *goods* and justifying *reasons*, 3.9 does not obviously follow from this claim. Further argument would be required, which argument Wilks has not provided.

The second observation is that the premises that invoke the notion of justifying reasons omit any distinction between *pro tanto* reasons and *decisive* reasons. *Pro tanto* reasons for doing something are considerations that weigh in favor of doing it. *Decisive* reasons settle rational deliberation in favor of a particular course of action.<sup>8</sup> So, since God is maximally rational, God has decisive reason to do *x* if, and only if, God actually does *x*. Given this, the term “justifying reason” in premises 3.9 and 3.13 cannot sensibly be interpreted as meaning *decisive justifying reason*. For if we do interpret it that way, then 3.9 entails that it is a consequence of skeptical theism that we cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that DH is true. But that claim is not at all obviously true, nor has Wilks argued that it is true. Thus, “justifying reason” must be interpreted in this argument as meaning *pro tanto justifying reason*. Doing so renders premise 3.9 more plausible. (More exactly: it renders 3.9 more plausible on the assumption that 3.4 and 3.7 are true.) But it raises other problems that shall become apparent later in this section.

I turn now to critical remarks. In connection with 3.4, 3.7, and 3.9, all I shall say is this: Wilks has not argued, nor is there any obvious reason to believe, that the following propositions are inconsistent:

- 3.15. Theism, ST, and ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub> are all true.
- 3.16. It would be evil for God to bring it about that DH is true, and this fact can be known to be true on the basis of rational intuition.

That is, there is no clear way of deriving the denial of 3.16 from the proposition that (a) God exists, (b) we cannot be justified in believing of any actual evil that it is gratuitous, and (c) we cannot tell whether the sample of possible goods, evils, and connections among them of which we are aware is representative. But this is precisely what would have to be derived in order to defend any of 3.4, 3.7, or 3.9.

8 Cf. Murphy (2006: 413). Murphy, in turn, follows Raz (1979).

Bear in mind here that the denial of DH is, like the denial of any other radical skeptical hypothesis, a perfectly rational starting point. If it were not so, everyone would face insurmountable skeptical threats.<sup>9</sup> But from the denial of DH, we can deduce that God lacks decisive reason to bring it about that DH is true. This comports well with our independent intuition that it would be evil for God to bring it about that DH is true. Thus, there is no reason to think that our intuition on this score is challenged by the recognition that our sample of possible goods, evils, and connections among them might not be representative.

That said, I think that some skeptical theists will not wish to affirm what 3.4 says they cannot rationally affirm, and some will also want to accept the claims that 3.7 and 3.9 say that skeptical theism implies. Moreover, though Wilks himself has not defended 3.4, 3.7, and 3.9, I think that most philosophers will take *at least one* of those premises to be defensible. So, to my mind, the really interesting question here is whether 3.13 is true. I think that it is not.

Suppose we concede the following (which is just a slightly clarified version of the antecedent of 3.13 specified to a particular subject, S):

- 3.13a. (i) S cannot rationally dismiss DH as impossible or absolutely unreasonable to believe; (ii) S cannot rationally dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a *pro tanto* justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true; and (iii) citing evidence against DH presupposes the falsity of DH.

Now, what follows? It seems to me that if anything here implies that S has a *defeater* for most of her beliefs, it is 3.13a(ii), and this by way of implying that she has a defeater for her (tacit or explicit) belief that DH is false. 3.13a(i) implies that the defeater cannot itself be defeated by S's rationally coming to the belief that DH is impossible or unreasonable to believe; and 3.13a(iii) implies that the defeater cannot be defeated by evidence. So the next question to ask is whether 3.13a(ii) *really* implies that S has a defeater for most of her beliefs.

Let me pause to note that Wilks and Maitzen both seem to think that the answer is “yes.” In discussing Bergmann’s “commonsensist” view that we know via commonsense that we are not victims of radical skeptical scenarios, Wilks argues that there is a difference between the skeptical theist’s position vis-à-vis DH and her (and everyone else’s) position vis-à-vis more familiar skeptical scenarios. For most skeptical scenarios, we can dismiss as false or unlikely the hypothesis that there is a being willing and able to enact them, but, according to Wilks, the skeptical theist already admits the existence of a being who is *able* to bring about the truth of DH, and she cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the hypothesis that this being is also *willing* to bring it about. This difference, he thinks, is sufficient to plunge the skeptical theist into radical skepticism. But that consequence follows only if 3.13a(ii)

<sup>9</sup> Wilks might concede this much but insist that the skeptical theist’s skepticism precludes her from taking DH as a starting point. But, of course, that is a thesis that would have to be supported by argument, as it is hardly self-evident.

A more interesting move would be to concede the point and then to ask why it does not apply to skeptical theses like ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub>. That is, why are we not entitled to take the denials of *those* theses as perfectly rational starting points? Since this question is *not* raised by Maitzen, O’Connor, or Wilks, and since it has (in my opinion) been adequately addressed elsewhere (Howard-Snyder 2009, 25–28), I shall simply refer the reader to that discussion.

implies that S has a defeater for most of her beliefs. Maitzen, in presenting an argument very similar to Wilks's, gestures at the same point (which seems to be the very crux of his argument):

[If] fraud and deception are . . . consistent with God's perfection, [then] we can rule them out only by presuming that God can have no morally sufficient reasons for committing them. (Wilks 2013, 447)

This seems likewise to presuppose that 3.13a(ii) implies that S has a defeater for most of her beliefs. But I think that we can see clearly that 3.13a(ii) does *not* imply that S has a defeater for the belief that DH is false. If it does not imply this, then it also does not imply that she has a defeater for more ordinary beliefs.

Consider the following case: You have just been diagnosed with cancer. A doctor whom you do not know very well (so not *your* doctor) tells you that if you maintain a healthy lifestyle and are diligent about your treatments, your chances of beating the cancer are very good. You have no independent information on this topic (and no opportunity to get independent information any time soon), and you have no reason to suspect that this doctor is deceiving you. So you believe her and you go home feeling quite good. Still, upon reflection you realize that you cannot tell how likely it is that she would have a *pro tanto* justifying reason to deceive you about your chances of beating the cancer. You can imagine some reasons a doctor – even a highly virtuous doctor – might have for deceiving you. You have heard that there are correlations between optimism about survival and increased survival rates, for example. But you have no idea whether such correlations apply to your case, nor do you even have any idea whether your sources of information on this topic are reliable, nor do you have any clue whether or to what extent such considerations would weigh, in her estimation, in favor of deceiving you. Furthermore, you realize that *pro tanto* reasons come very cheaply: any consideration in favor of doing something, no matter how weak, constitutes a *pro tanto* reason for doing it. So, you reflect, *obviously* you can have no clear idea how likely it is that the doctor has a *pro tanto* reason for deceiving you. Do you now have a defeater for your belief that this doctor is telling you the truth (or for your belief that your chances of beating the cancer are good, so long as you follow the relevant advice)? No. Clearly you do not. It is perfectly rational for you to dismiss the doctor-deception hypothesis on the grounds that you have no good reason to think that it is true.

Or consider this case: You go to the supermarket and discover that they are out of your favorite kind of beer. You ask the store clerk where else in town you might find some. She says that she has checked everywhere within a 10-mile radius and nobody else carries it. (It is a special import.) You find that plausible; it fits your experience. But, upon reflection, you realize that you have no idea what the likelihood is that she has a *pro tanto* justifying reason for deceiving you on this topic. You do not know her at all – you just met her today. So you have no idea how considerations of loyalty to her place of employment (say), or the desire to appear more thorough in her beer-searching than she really has been, would weigh against whatever propensities toward truth-telling she might have. And, again, you recognize that *pro tanto* reasons come cheaply. Do you now have a defeater for your newly acquired belief that no one else carries your favorite brand of beer? Again, you do not. You are rationally entitled simply to dismiss the clerk-deception hypothesis on the grounds that you have no good reason to think that it is true.

As a general rule, we are justified in believing the testimony of others in the absence of defeaters that either rebut their testimony or cast doubt on their reliability. So, as a general

rule, we are justified (absent defeaters) in dismissing both the hypothesis that the testifier is deceiving us *and* the hypothesis that she has a *decisive reason* for deceiving us. But, again, *pro tanto* reasons come cheaply. So our ignorance of other people’s values, desires, particular needs and circumstances, and so on means that we often will have no idea how likely it is whether they have *pro tanto* reasons for deceiving us or for doing all manner of other bad or crazy things. Knowing this, it is not rational simply to *dismiss* the hypothesis that testifiers whom we do not know have *pro tanto* reasons for deceiving us. Nor, however, should we think that our inability to dismiss this hypothesis constitutes a defeater for our presumption that they are in fact telling the truth. For if it did constitute such a defeater, we would almost never be justified in trusting testimony.

What goes for the earlier cases goes likewise for the divine case. Grant that ST1<sub>B</sub>–ST3<sub>B</sub> imply that we cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the hypothesis that God has a *pro tanto* reason for deceiving us in significant ways. Still, for the sorts of reasons just given, this in no way implies that we cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the hypothesis that DH is true; nor does it supply us with a defeater for our presumption that DH is probably false; nor, therefore, does it supply us with a defeater for more ordinary beliefs grounded in our trust in sense perception, testimony, reason, and the like.

## Skepticism About Value

Both Maitzen and O’Connor give arguments for the conclusion that skeptical theism poses a problem for our beliefs about putative divine commands: we cannot know exactly what God means by them, we cannot know what God intends for us to do in response to them, and we cannot know what, if anything, they reflect about divine values. For O’Connor, this skepticism about divine commands also induces skepticism about what counts as sin. Furthermore, he thinks that skeptical theists face problems in believing that God is good. I will discuss each of these arguments in the order listed.

First, divine commands. In sum, O’Connor’s argument runs as follows: (i) Philosophically informed, reflective, and otherwise rational theists will think that our understanding of the content and normative force of God’s commands comes only from one or more of the following sources: religious experience, scripture, church teaching, or reason. However, (ii) what they will know about religious experience provides them with an undefeated defeater for the belief that religious experience is a reliable source of information about God’s intentions, values, or commands.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, (iii) *skeptical* theists have an undefeated defeater for the view that church teachings and scriptural texts, and human reason are reliable sources of information about God’s intentions, values, or commands. Reason is ruled out because (iv) skeptical theism implies that human moral judgments and moral

10 O’Connor says simply that philosophically minded skeptical theists will have “good reason to hesitate” before taking religious experiences at face value and so “may, plausibly, become less than quite confident about believing that [their] own purported revelation experiences are truly experiences of a divine being or of a supernatural surrogate” (O’Connor 2013, 471). These remarks fall somewhat short of the stronger claim in (ii). However, replacing the stronger claim with these remarks leaves the skeptical theist with an easy reply. She might well have “serious reasons to hesitate” and even to be less than “quite confident” that her religious experiences are experiences of God. But all of this is consistent with the claim that philosophically minded skeptical theists can ultimately be rational in taking their religious experiences to be transparently intelligible communications from God.



values are not reliable indicators of divine values and commands.<sup>11</sup> Scripture and church teaching are ruled out because each is the product of human attempts to interpret putative divine communication, and (v) skeptical theism implies that that we have no good reason to believe that such attempts will reliably succeed.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, (vi) skeptical theists have an undefeated defeater for the belief that they understand the content and normative force of God's commands, and so (vii) they have no good reason to think that "what they regard as God's "thou shalt not" commands are unrestrictedly forbidding certain actions as sins" (O'Connor 2013, 470–472).

There are two general (and related) problems with this argument. The first is that, as we have already seen (in the first section of this chapter), O'Connor has confused skeptical theism with more radical claims about divine transcendence. Were he correct in his understanding of skeptical theism, premises (iv) and (v) – the ones that report what skeptical theism *implies* – might be quite plausible. As it stands, however, there is no obvious reason for thinking that those premises are true. That is, there is no obvious reason for thinking that ST or ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub> imply what O'Connor says that skeptical theism implies. Which brings us to the second problem: O'Connor has offered no argument in support of premises (ii), (iv), or (v). This is startling in light of the absolutely crucial role these premises play in establishing his final conclusion. But there it is anyway.<sup>13</sup> He seems to think that the truth of these claims is just obvious, and this despite the fact that (e.g.) philosophers like William P. Alston (1991) and Alvin Plantinga (2000) have devoted hundreds of pages to rebutting (ii), and despite the fact that most skeptical theists believe the denials of (iv) and (v).

Highlighting these two problems constitutes sufficient rebuttal to O'Connor's argument. But I think it will be instructive to pause to consider the profile of a *particular* (fictional) skeptical theist so that we can see more clearly the argumentative burden that O'Connor

11 He writes: "it is a basic tenet of [the skeptical theist's] skeptical defense that we have no good reason to suppose that actual or possible goods, evils, and the entailment relations between them, as we are aware or can conceive of them, are representative of such things to God, no matter how good and bad the goods and evils respectively are to us or how inconceivable to us a justification for certain actions and kinds of actions may be. So, on the basis of that, she has no good reason to think that, when it comes to the particular circumstances of a particular homicide, theft, abduction, or sexual abuse of a child, or even when it comes to considering such things in the abstract, how she or the rest of us may see them is representative of how they are in the eyes of God" (O'Connor 2013, 472).

12 He says: "given . . . skepticism about supposing that possible goods, evils, and entailment relations between them, as we are aware of those things, are representative of such things to God, it is only a small step to justifiably thinking that, by virtue of the same gap between human and divine cognition that drives [the first sort of skepticism, one] also has no good reason to think that how she interprets supposed experiences of, or communications from, God is representative of their meaning in the mind of God or of what God . . . intends her to understand by them" (O'Connor 2013, 471).

13 A casual glance at the remarks quoted in note 11 might lead one to think that premise (iv) is defended by argument. In fact, however, those remarks simply report (inaccurately) a basic tenet of skeptical theism and an alleged consequence of that tenet. There is no argument for the claim that skeptical theism (or the alleged basic tenet thereof) implies the consequence in question. Roughly the same is true of premise (v) and the remarks quoted in note 12. As for premise (ii), on p. 471, O'Connor (2013) notes some facts awareness of which he takes to constitute a defeater for beliefs formed on the basis of religious experience: for example, facts about the "*prima facie* appalling actions carried out by people, while supposedly inspired by personal experience of the voice or will of God" or about (the dangers of?) "wishful thinking, emotional need or projection, personification, [etc.]." But he offers no argument for the conclusion that awareness of such facts *inevitably* supplies one with a defeater for beliefs formed on the basis of religious experience, or for belief that one's own religious experience is a reliable source of information about divine intentions, values, or commands.

faces. Moreover, it is instructive not only in relation to the argument we are presently considering, but also in relation to other arguments by Maitzen, O'Connor, and Wilks that I shall consider later in the chapter. Thus, we shall have cause to refer back to this profile when we consider those arguments later on.

In presenting the profile, I shall fill in a variety of background beliefs and circumstances that I think make some difference in our overall assessment of the subject's rationality. The profile presupposes that premises (ii), (iv), and (v), as well as some additional premises that show up in later arguments, are all false. My expectation is not that readers will take the profile to refute these premises; rather, it is that they will see that more detailed and careful argumentation is required to establish them. The premises whose falsity I shall presuppose are intuitively appealing, it seems to me, only when one is not sufficiently attentive to the variety of ways in which the moral, religious, and philosophical beliefs of skeptical theists can be acquired, combined, and *prima facie* justified. I expect that readers will find my description of the profiled subject to be psychologically plausible; I also expect that they will *not* regard her as manifestly irrational. But the fact is that, if the arguments considered in this section and the next are correct, the person I shall describe *must* be irrational. The challenge, then, for the proponents of those arguments is to show why she is irrational. I do not think that this challenge has been met. Along the way, I shall explain why.

Consider Lucy, a Christian who has come to hold a wide variety of beliefs about God and God's commands in a way that is quite common for reflective Christians. She has listened to the testimony of respected authorities, read the Bible from cover to cover, and reflected on the nature, love, and goodness of God over the course of many years during Bible studies, church services, and her own personal times of prayer and meditation. In reflecting on these things, she has attended carefully to how all of her various sources portray God's love and goodness, and she has also attended to how well (and not) these portrayals comport with her own intuitions about love and moral perfection. Religious experience has entered the picture too. Like many theists, she has had a number of what we might call "low-grade" religious experiences: the feeling of blessed assurance that she is loved and forgiven by God, the strong sense of God's presence in the world and to her in particular, and so on. She believes these experiences to be veridical and, although they do not carry much content about the particular nature of divine love and goodness, they serve to reinforce in her the conviction that God is loving and good.

In forming all of these beliefs, she takes it for granted that her moral intuitions are generally (though far from perfectly) reliable, that she has a fair bit of moral knowledge, and so on. But she also takes it for granted that God's goodness far outstrips her own, that her moral intuitions are biased in many ways by her own self-interested desires, and that (as she has learned to her chagrin over and over throughout her life) she is subject to moral "blind spots" and, in particular, to errors (sometimes serious ones) about what might justify what. In this, her condition is no different from that of virtually any other morally decent – indeed, even morally excellent – person. She knows this, and she does not find in this knowledge any reason to think that fallible human beings like herself are doomed to the abyss of radical moral skepticism.

So far so good. There is nothing obviously irrational in Lucy's overall set of beliefs; nor is there any clear reason for thinking that she is wrong to reject moral skepticism. Now suppose she *adds* to this belief set ST, and ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub>. That is, she becomes a skeptical theist. Suppose further that she adds these beliefs partly on the basis of her own keen awareness

that no good she knows of seems even close to sufficient to justify a perfectly loving God in permitting the severe psychological and sexual abuse that she herself suffered at the hands of a neighbor when she was a child. In adding ST and ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub>, she does not moderate any of her other moral beliefs, because she takes those to be independent of her assessments about how representative her sample of possible goods, evils, and connections among them might be. Indeed, she realizes that it takes a great deal of moral knowledge even to *sort* her sample of states of affairs into the categories of *possible good* and *possible evil*. It also takes a great deal of moral knowledge to reach the judgment (as she has) that no known good is sufficient to justify God in permitting all of the suffering we see in our world (or even all of her own). She has therefore not come to question her sorting procedure, nor has she come to question any of the other moral knowledge she has. She simply realizes that for all she knows, her sample might be comparatively small and strongly biased – perhaps in the direction of *human* goods and evils, perhaps in the direction of *humanly graspable* goods and evils, perhaps in the direction of *relatively superficial* goods and evils, and so on.

Now, let us ask: Does she have “serious reasons to hesitate” before thinking that she has good reason to take her religious experiences at face value? Should she become “less than quite confident about believing that her own purported revelation experiences are truly experiences of a divine being”? Premise (ii) says that the answers to these questions are both affirmative. But O’Connor has said nothing that supports this verdict (see again notes 10 and 13), nor is it plain from the description of the case that the questions should be answered affirmatively. Does she have good reason to doubt her reflective interpretations of her own religious experiences? Premises (ii) and (v) imply that the answer is yes. But, again, neither anything that O’Connor has said nor anything manifest in the description of the case seems to support an affirmative answer. (Cf. notes 10, 12, and 13.) So if premises (ii) and (v) are true, it is not at all obvious that they are.

What about Lucy’s own moral judgments? Suppose she is thinking now about whether it is permissible to divorce her husband. She finds in scripture the claim that “God hates divorce,” which she takes to be evidence that God does not generally permit divorce – at least not for the reasons why *she* would be getting a divorce. But her moral intuitions tell her that divorce for those reasons is entirely permissible. After digging into the scriptures, she finds that the waters in the neighborhood of this question are quite murky. So she finds herself with reason to doubt that “God hates divorce” implies what it seems to imply. On the other hand, she realizes all too well that she has a strong personal stake in having the “verdict of scripture” come down in favor of the permissibility of her divorce. She will feel much less conflicted about the course of action she is considering if she can convince herself that God does not object. So, in other words, she realizes that her interpretation of scripture might be tainted by self-interest. She also realizes that her intuitions might be so tainted as well. Does she now have reason to doubt that her own moral judgment about the moral status of divorce is “representative of its moral status in the eyes of God”? Yes, of course. This is not because she is a skeptical theist, however. It is because of a prior belief that partly grounds her skeptical theism – namely, the belief that she is morally fallible and subject to bias, and that God is not morally fallible.

But she still does *not* seem to have any reason to question beliefs like “God detests murder” or “God disapproves of adultery.” Again, as a skeptical theist, she thinks that her sample of possible goods, evils, and connections between them is biased. She recognizes that she is fallible in other ways, and that self-interest and other factors sometimes cloud her moral judgment. But she has not given up thinking that she is nonetheless *pretty good*

at distinguishing goods from evils, and moral intuition screams out to her – wholly in accord with the voice of scripture – that murder and adultery are wrong, and that God therefore disapproves of them. Do ST, or ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub>, even so much as suggest that her beliefs here are irrational? They do not. At any rate, O'Connor has given no argument for the conclusion that they do. (Cf. notes 11 and 13.) So premise (iv) stands in need of substantial defense as well.

Maitzen also offers an argument from skeptical theism to skepticism about divine commands. The first part of the argument, with which I shall not take issue, proceeds as follows (note that I am paraphrasing, not quoting):

We find apparently conflicting commands in the scriptures of the different theistic traditions. None of these putative revelations is self-authenticating; so theists must decide which to take as genuine. Moreover, within the scriptures of each tradition, we find commands (e.g., to avoid mixed-fiber clothing or to stone disobedient children) that adherents of the relevant tradition regard as having been superseded by other commands or as being for other reasons inapplicable or not reflective of genuine divine preferences about the behavior of contemporary human beings. In order to decide which to take as genuine, we must determine which to take as most likely expressing God's will and intentions. Therefore, identifying God's genuine commands requires human insight into God's reasons and intentions. (Maitzen 2013, 451–483)

Let us grant the subconclusion. Let us further grant (as Maitzen seems to affirm) that just as human insight into God's reasons and intentions is needed in order to *identify* God's commands, so too it is needed to “resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to our actual circumstances” (451). Then:

- 4.0. One can identify God's genuine commands, resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to one's actual circumstances only if one has human insight into God's reasons and intentions.

At this point, Maitzen introduces a further premise, followed by a rhetorical question:

- 4.1. One has human insight into God's reasons and intentions only if one “independently understand[s] the realm of value [i.e., understands it in a way not dependent upon our prior beliefs about the content of God's commands] well enough to tell which acts and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command” (Maitzen 2013, 452).
- 4.2. “How then can we understand the realm of value well enough to tell which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command and yet, as skeptical theists insist, not understand that realm well enough to tell which cases of horrific suffering a perfect being would be at all likely to permit?” (Maitzen 2013, 452).

I assume (but am not certain) that the question is supposed to function as if it were equivalent to the following conjunction:

- 4.3. If skeptical theism is true, then (a) we do not understand the realm of value well enough to tell which cases of horrific suffering a perfect being would be at all likely to permit; *and* if (a) is true, then (b) we cannot understand the realm of value well enough to tell which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command.

Replacing 4.2 with 4.3 introduces no additional problems into Maitzen's argument, and it has the virtue of rendering valid his inference to the following conclusion:

- 4.4. Therefore: "[If skeptical theism is true, then] we can't identify God's commands, resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to our actual circumstances . . ." (Maitzen 2013, 451).

Still, the argument is unconvincing, for there is no reason to think that either 4.1 or 4.3 is true. Consider Lucy. Is her understanding of the realm of value *independent* of her views about what God has commanded? Apparently not. Her moral beliefs are intimately connected to her religious upbringing. Indeed, we may speculate that (like many Christians) she grew up thinking that moral value is grounded somehow in divine preferences and commands. Does it follow from this that she "lacks the requisite insight to identify God's genuine commands"? Hardly, and this for two reasons.

First, Maitzen has not ruled out the possibility of reliably arriving at beliefs about divine commands via routes other than reflection on facts about value. Suppose Christianity is true, and suppose the Christian scriptures are – when properly understood – reliable sources of information about divine commands. Suppose further that careful, prayerful attention to the scriptural texts themselves and to the vast body of commentary on those texts within the Christian tradition will resolve many, even if not all, questions about which putative commands in scripture are genuine and which are merely apparent, and about which are still applicable and which are not. Many Christians, including some who are skeptical theists, will affirm these suppositions, and Maitzen has given no argument for the conclusion that they are false. But if they are true, then (*contra* Maitzen) someone like Lucy may very well *not* "lack the requisite insight to identify God's genuine commands."

Second, it seems clear that all one really needs in order to discern some facts about what a perfect being would be likely to command is *knowledge that there is at least one type of act that is morally wrong*. But so far as I can tell – and so far as Maitzen has argued – there is no reason to think that one can have such knowledge only if one's grasp of the realm of moral value is *independent* of one's beliefs about God's reasons and intentions.

Likewise, premise 4.3 has little to recommend it either. Suppose Lucy considers her belief that the commands in the Decalogue are indeed God's commands, and suppose she asks herself whether it is likely that a perfect being would issue a command prohibiting (say) murder. Moral intuition says that murder (the killing of someone for no justifying reason) is wrong, and she cannot imagine a perfect being approving of murder. So she reasons that it is indeed likely that a perfect being would issue such a command. Neither ST nor ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub> raise any obstacle to these thoughts on her part; nor does her acceptance of those theses supply her with a defeater for the belief that it is likely that God would prohibit murder. Indeed, it does not even supply a defeater for her more "speculative" beliefs, for example, that it is likely that God would not approve of one person's severely abusing another. She acknowledges that her sample of possible goods, evils, and connections among them may not be representative; she is likewise firmly of the conviction that we cannot be justified in believing (for example) that the abuse she suffered as a child is gratuitous. But these beliefs of hers obviously do not constitute evidence that God might approve of murder or abuse. So they do not defeat her justification for believing that it is likely that God would prohibit murder and abuse.

Maitzen acknowledges a further possible reply to his argument: namely, that a skeptical theist might insist that, even if we do not have *representative* knowledge of the realm of value, we nevertheless know *enough* (independently of our beliefs about divine commands, I take it) to discern at least a few divine commands. This is an attack on premise 4.1. Obviously I have chosen to address that premise in a different way; but it is worth noting that even this objection is stronger than Maitzen gives it credit for being.

In reply to the objection, Maitzen says:

[a]ccording to [skeptical theism], we lack what it takes even to *estimate the likelihood* that some compensating good justifies a perfect being's permitting [the instance of suffering under consideration in his paper]. . . . By the same token, we can't estimate the likelihood that some reason lying beyond our ken turns what seems to us a diabolical command into just the thing a perfect being would tell someone to do in the particular circumstances. (Maitzen 2013, 452–453)

Strictly speaking, the first quoted sentence here is false: skeptical theists do not deny (for example) that one who believes that God exists and would not permit gratuitous evil can reasonably infer from these beliefs that there is no gratuitous evil. But set this aside for now. Still, it is hard to see why one should think that the truth of the second sentence follows. Again, suppose that Lucy considers the question of whether God might *command* the sort of abuse that she suffered as a child. It is part of her skeptical theism to say that, for all she knows, some good beyond her ken justifies God in *permitting* that suffering. So, she might reason, perhaps there is some good beyond her ken that would justify God in *commanding* the abuse that led to her suffering as well. Still, this is not evidence that God *did* command the abuse she underwent; it is not evidence that God *would* ever command that sort of abuse; it is not evidence that God even *might* issue a general command that people engage in that sort of abuse. Is it at least evidence that God might, at some point, *once* command someone to engage in that sort of abuse? No; not even that. For even if there is some good that might *justify* God in commanding that sort of abuse, Lucy has no evidence whatsoever that the good in question is one that God might desire to bring about. (Cf. the “Global Skepticism” section.) At best, then, Lucy has evidence only for what she already takes herself to know – namely, that God would, under some circumstances, permit the abuse that she suffered. So it seems that even if we grant the first part of Maitzen's reply, the second (and crucial) part simply does not follow.

The final two objections to be considered in this section are O'Connor's claims that (a) skeptical theism implies that we cannot identify any actions as sins, and (b) skeptical theism implies skepticism about divine goodness and divine values. The first argument can be dismissed immediately, since its central premise is just the conclusion (viii) that I have already shown to be unsupported. The second argument runs as follows:

- 4.5. “My believing that somebody is a morally good person requires my believing him to be good according to the standards of moral goodness that I myself accept” (O'Connor 2013, 473).
- 4.6. “The basic tenet of [skeptical theism], namely, that we have no good reason to think that either our concepts or measures of goodness in human persons are representative of those applying to infinite, non-human persons” implies that the skeptical theist “has no good reason to suppose she understands what she believes about divine goodness” (O'Connor 2013, 474) and “has no good reason to think that she would recognize divine goodness as goodness” (O'Connor 2013, 475).



4.7. Therefore: A skeptical theist cannot reasonably believe that God is good.

Let premise 4.5 pass. The main problem with the argument is that 4.6 is false (as we have already seen in the first section). We might ask, however, what happens if we replace premise 4.6 with a premise that really *does* state a basic tenet of skeptical theism. Suppose, for example, we replace 4.6 with 4.8:

4.8. Skeptical theism affirms both ST and ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub>.

Now does the conclusion follow? It does only if the following premise is also true:

4.9. The conjunction of ST & ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub> implies that we have no reason to believe that God counts as good according to standards of goodness that we ourselves accept.

But 4.9 is false. Again, consider Lucy: Her standards of goodness are standards that she has drawn from scripture, moral intuition, and testimony from people she admires and respects. Her belief that God is good (according to standards that she accepts) is grounded in scripture, religious experience, testimony, and intuitions about the nature of perfection. Does her belief that her *sample* of possible goods, evils, and connections among them may not be representative somehow count against any of this? I cannot see that it does, and O'Connor has not argued that it does. What about her belief that human beings cannot be justified in saying of actual horrendous evils (like her own childhood suffering) that they are gratuitous? *This* belief actually seems to presuppose that God is good according to standards of goodness that we ourselves accept. Of course, she does believe that there may be something wrong with her standards – she is morally fallible. But in the course of defending premise 4.5, O'Connor concedes that we might reasonably believe of someone that she is morally good even if we do not think that she is good according to *all* of our moral standards. All that is required is that there be some significant overlap between our standards of goodness and the standards to which she conforms.

## Skepticism About (Other) Knowledge of God

O'Connor and Wilks both claim that skeptical theism generates problems for certain other beliefs we might have about God. O'Connor, for example, says that it undermines our reasons for thinking that our sufferings are not gratuitous, it undermines our ability to have a relationship with God, it deprives us of any basis for attributing purposes or reasons for action to God, and it undermines belief in miracles, as well as belief in crucial premises of certain natural theological arguments. The problem, however, is that *all* of these objections are predicated on the success of his argument for the conclusion that skeptical theists have defeaters for their beliefs about God's goodness and about the contents of God's commands. As we have already seen, however, those arguments are not successful, and so these conclusions likewise are left unsupported. In light of this, I shall focus attention in this section on Wilks's argument.

According to Wilks, skeptical theism undermines our ability to "[take] particular goods as signs of God's presence," and to "[see] things and events in the world around us as manifestations of God" (Wilks 2013, 460). Why should this be so? As I understand it, his argument runs as follows :



- 5.1. If skeptical theism is true, then “we should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do” (Wilks 2013, 458).
- 5.2. “If we should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do, then it seems we should also be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be *good* for God to do” (Wilks 2013, 459).
- 5.3. Therefore: If skeptical theism is true, we should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be good for God to do.
- 5.4. Consequences of both goods and evils can run contrary to appearances: *prima facie* good events can have very bad consequences, and *prima facie* evil events can have very good consequences.
- 5.5. Therefore “we have equally little reason to suppose that we can discern their actual standing as good or evil on the basis of properties internal to them” (Wilks 2013, 460).
- 5.6. If we should be skeptical of any claim to know what it would be good for God to do, and if we have equally little reason to suppose that we can discern whether an event is good or evil on the basis of properties internal to it, then we have “no reason to think we see in a particular good a sign of God’s presence any more than we have reason to think we see in a particular evil a sign of his absence”<sup>14</sup> (Wilks 2013, 460).
- 5.7. Therefore: if skeptical theism is true, “we have no reason to think we see in a particular good a sign of God’s presence any more than we have reason to think we see in a particular evil a sign of his absence.”

The conclusion here is not quite the same as O’Connor’s conclusion that skeptical theism implies that we have no reason to think that we can see God’s purposes in particular events or claim any knowledge of God’s values. But obviously there are similarities. Like O’Connor, Wilks takes his conclusion to have untoward implications for skeptical theists’ acceptance of the argument from design.

We saw in the first section of this chapter that premise 5.1 is false. So the argument to 5.3 is unsound. There is no independent reason to accept 5.3 either. So I reject that claim. Those, like me, who reject consequentialism will also reject the inference from 5.4 to 5.5. Wilks says that consequentialism “operates in the background” of skeptical theism, so (presumably) he thinks that skeptical theists are bound to accept that inference. But, as we have already seen, that claim rests on a misconception.

Finally, premise 5.6 is also false. Suppose you endorse for good reasons the view that it is part of the human design plan to have experiences as of the presence of God when we experience certain kinds of phenomena – a sublime vista, communion with fellow believers, and so on. Suppose, furthermore, that you have some such experiences. You will then have good reason to think that you see in some particular phenomenon a sign of God’s presence, and if the phenomenon in question is, in fact, good, then (whether you recognize it as good or not) you will have good reason to think that you see in some particular *good* a sign of God’s presence. Moreover, you will have this reason even if you accept all of the premises of Wilks’s argument.

<sup>14</sup> Wilks does not explicitly affirm 5.6; rather, the quoted material in this premise is part of his overall conclusion. I have supplied premise 5.6 simply in order to render the argument valid.

## Moral Paralysis

I turn finally to Maitzen's moral paralysis objection. In defending this objection, Maitzen takes an argument by Almeida and Oppy (2003) as his springboard. In short, Almeida and Oppy argue that if you think (as the skeptical theist does) that there might be some great good that can justify God in permitting some evil, then you should also think that there might be some great good that can justify *you* in permitting the same evil. But if you think this, then you cannot sensibly think that you *ought* to intervene to prevent the evil in question. I have already replied to this argument in an article co-authored with Michael Bergmann (Bergmann and Rea 2005). Maitzen's goal here is to rebut that reply, arguing that even if skeptical theists can somehow *justify* intervention to prevent some evil, they cannot sensibly take themselves to be *obligated* to prevent it.

Before presenting Maitzen's argument, I should note that even if the argument were sound, I am not sure that the conclusion would be all that damaging. It is well known that belief in a general obligation to prevent suffering yields highly counterintuitive conclusions. Peter Unger (1996), for example, reasons quite persuasively from the principle that

(U1) If we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, it is wrong for us not to do so. (Unger 1996, 8; cf. Singer 1972.)

to the conclusion that

(U2) On pain of living a life that's seriously immoral, a typical well-off person, like you and me, must give away most of her financially valuable assets, and much of her income, directing the funds to lessen efficiently the serious suffering of others. (Unger 1996, 134)

But U2 seems to me (and most other people, I think) to be false. Thus, by rebutting Maitzen's argument here, I do not intend to sign on to the presupposition that the denial of his conclusion is part of "commonsense" morality.

The core of Maitzen's argument is the following analogy, which I quote at length:

Imagine that a well-armed tribesman walks into a jungle field hospital and sees someone in strange garb (known to us as the surgeon) about to cut open the abdomen of the tribesman's wife, who lies motionless on a table. It certainly looks to the tribesman like a deadly assault, and thus he sees good reason to attack the surgeon and no particular reason not to. But suppose that the tribesman also believes that strangely garbed magicians (known to us as surgeons) travel around who miraculously save dying people by cutting them open. As a result, he currently believes "If this is one of those life-saving miracles, I shouldn't expect to know it." The incision is about to happen, and clearly there's no time to investigate before acting. Given his beliefs, does it follow that he *ought* to attack the surgeon, i.e., that he would be wrong to refrain? I think not. At most what follows is that he *may* attack the surgeon, even at the cost of preventing his wife's life-saving appendectomy: we get at most permission rather than obligation. Skeptical theism asks us to admit that we occupy the same position with respect to the realm of value that the tribesman occupies with respect to modern medicine: we shouldn't expect to see how it works. Yet skeptical theists such as Bergmann and Rea claim to preserve, despite their skepticism, our ordinary moral *obligation* to intervene in such cases. . . . Their claim is correct only if the tribesman is obligated to attack the surgeon. (Maitzen 2013, 456)

So, in short, it is the tribesman’s “legitimate self-doubt” (Maitzen 2013, 456) that mitigates any obligation he might have had to intervene, and Maitzen’s idea is that skeptical theists are likewise subject to such legitimate self-doubt when confronted with serious suffering or evil that they are in a position to prevent. Thus, like the tribesman, they have no obligation to intervene either.

Moreover, Maitzen goes on to argue that the (typical theistic) belief that “someone exists who can make this suffering turn out for the best even if I don’t intervene” (Maitzen 2013, 450) mitigates whatever obligations we might have to intervene to prevent serious harm. For suppose we have such a belief. Then, says Maitzen, “[w]e ought . . . to feel less obligated (or less clearly obligated, if obligation doesn’t come in degrees) to prevent and relieve suffering than we would feel if we didn’t believe in such a potential guarantor of a good outcome” (Maitzen 2013, 451). Here, then, it is not *skeptical* theism that causes the problem, but simply *theism* (in conjunction with an otherwise ordinary set of beliefs about morality).

Maitzen notes that one reply that can be made by skeptical theists – and that has been made to Almeida and Oppy’s version of the moral paralysis argument – is that divine commands can ground our obligations to intervene to prevent serious suffering. But, says Maitzen, this reply is unworkable, partly because skeptical theism induces skepticism about the content and application conditions of putative divine commands (as seen earlier), but also because (a) there is no explicit command in scripture to intervene to prevent serious harm, and (b) if we try to derive the obligation from God’s other commands, we presuppose insight into God’s assumptions in issuing God’s commands – insight “skeptical theism says we have no right to think we possess” (Maitzen 2013, 454).

There are two points I wish to make by way of reply.

First, suppose we pursue the line of reply that appeals to our knowledge of divine commands (or, more broadly, divine values). Maitzen is correct that we find in scripture no explicit command to intervene with preventive measures when we encounter someone who is about to cause grievous harm to another. But that does not mean that scripture is wholly silent on the matter. We are told to love our neighbors as ourselves; we are enjoined to help the poor, show compassion to those who are sick and suffering, visit people in prison, care for orphans and widows, and so on. The prophet Micah says,

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?  
(Micah 6:8, New Revised Standard Version)

None of this can very well be done without intervening somehow in the lives of others, and it seems clear that those who refuse to intervene in the lives of others are doing something wrong. None of this entails (say) that we are obligated to prevent a kidnapping when we see that it is about to occur and are able to prevent it at little risk or cost to ourselves. But it seems clearly to constitute evidence in favor of the view that we have such an obligation.

The question, then, is whether believing in such an obligation on the basis of evidence like this presupposes insight into God’s assumptions in issuing such commands that “skeptical theism says we have no right to think we possess.” If it does, Maitzen has not shown

that it does. As we saw in the section entitled “Skepticism about Value,” it simply does not follow from ST and ST<sub>1B</sub>–ST<sub>3B</sub> that we cannot sensibly assume that we understand at least some of the putative divine commands we find in scripture, nor does it follow that we cannot get some reasonably clear and action-guiding understanding of God’s values from scripture.

Second, consider Maitzen’s claim, toward the end of the quoted passage, that “[s]keptical theism asks us to admit that we occupy the same position with respect to the realm of value that the tribesman occupies with respect to modern medicine: we shouldn’t expect to see how it works.” This claim is, of course, absolutely crucial to his argument-by-analogy. If the skeptical theist is not in the same position with respect to the realm of value that the tribesman occupies with respect to modern medicine, then the analogy is bad and the argument fails.

But it should by now be clear that it is simply not true that skeptical theism asks us to admit that our position in relation to the realm of value resembles the tribesman’s position with respect to modern medicine. The tribesman has *no understanding whatsoever* of modern medicine. Indeed, he is worse off even than most elementary school children in the United States. For, after all, children do not usually regard successful surgeries as “life-saving miracles,” nor are they typically so ignorant and obtuse as to worry that those undergoing surgery are being *assaulted* by their physicians. So to say that the skeptical theist asks us to admit that our position in relation to the realm of value resembles the tribesman’s position with respect to modern medicine is to say that the skeptical theist asks us to admit that we are mostly clueless about the realm of value – we understand very little of it at all and, indeed, are inclined to reason rather stupidly about it. But as we have seen multiple times now in this chapter, that is not what the skeptical theist says. So, it seems to me, Maitzen’s argument by analogy fails.

One might object, however, that I am still failing to address the basic point of Maitzen’s argument. The core worry is something like this: Skeptical theists maintain that we are in a position of *some significant* ignorance with respect to the realm of value. Moreover, skeptical theists typically also think that unknown goods justify God in permitting all manner of horrendous things to happen to his creatures.<sup>15</sup> Given these two commitments, it seems (says the objector) that skeptical theists should also acknowledge that unknown goods, evils, and relations among goods and evils might justify *us* in permitting kidnappings and other serious evils. And if we do acknowledge this, then (the objection continues) it seems that we should be significantly less confident about our obligations to intervene than commonsense morality says that we should be.

My own answer to this objection is that just as God’s obligations depend to some extent upon what God knows, so too our obligations depend to some extent upon what we know. True enough, there might be goods, evils, and relations among them such that *if we knew about them*, we would revise some of our beliefs about how or whether we ought to intervene in various kinds of circumstances. But there is no reason to think that awareness of this fact should make us any less confident in our views about what we ought (or are obligated) to do in light of what we *actually* know (Cf. Bergmann and Rea 2005; Bergmann 2009, 2012). More exactly: I can see (and Maitzen has given) no reason for thinking this

15 Typically, but not necessarily, since one *can* be a skeptical theist while thinking either that some evils are gratuitous (and that this is not inconsistent with the existence of God) or that all evils are in fact justified by facts about known goods, known evils, and known relations among goods and evils.

that does not somehow depend on controversial moral or epistemological principles that skeptical theists as such are free to reject (Cf. Howard-Snyder 2009). Thus, absent further argument laying out the operative moral and epistemological principles and then somehow tying them to skeptical theism, the objection that skeptical theism undermines confidence in commonsense beliefs about our obligations to intervene is a failure.

## Acknowledgments

For helpful comments on and conversations about an earlier draft, I am grateful to Michael Bergmann, Jeff Brower, Trent Dougherty, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Hud Hudson, Justin McBrayer, Jeff Snapper, and Meghan Sullivan. I am also grateful to the participants in the (Fall 2012) weekly discussion group of the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame – especially Dustin Crummett, Katie Finley, Samuel Newlands, Faith Pawl, Tim Pawl, Bradley Rettler, Lindsay Rettler, Joshua Rasmussen, Amy Seymour, and James Sterba. Finally, I am grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for funding that supported a research leave during which portions of this paper were written.

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